

ON GRATITUDE
Luke 17:11-19
Sunrise Presbyterian Church
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Martha Murchison

"How are you doing?" We casually ask people. "Fine," some reply. "Good," others say. "Here," those a bit more negative reply. "I'm upright and sassy," Maxine Hammerli states every time I see her. "How are you doing?"

In all the myriad times we've answered that question, have we ever answered, "I'm grateful"?

I was on the way to an exceedingly grumpy day Tuesday. Before 6:30 a.m., I spilled my coffee twice! Once on my sewing basket and again all over the table in my study piled high with papers and books. I was certain so much spilled coffee would yield a bad day. I was not grateful. And then I began reading columnist, Sharon Salzberg. She notes that "the tendency for most of us each day is to focus on life's problems. . . . We're wired with what's called negativity bias -an evolutionary instinct to look out for threats so that we can escape them unharmed."

I perked up when I read, "We can learn to work with negativity bias. That doesn't mean that we can just flip the gratitude switch on. . . . But each time that dismissive instinct kicks in," Salzberg writes, "we can encourage ourselves to remember to reset our thoughts . . . and choose instead to gently settle our attention on something positive. We don't erase the pain - it's still there - but we can broaden our perspective by opening to our pain and also opening to things other than the suffering we feel."ⁱ In other words, even as we accept the hardship or difficulty in our lives - we can still choose to find gratitude.

As I wiped up the spilled coffee for the second time, I noticed pink rays of early dawn lighting up the eastern sky - and I was amazed. Suddenly, the mess did not seem as dire as it had. My day was wonderful beyond measure. My choice to focus beyond my mess changed everything.

Our morning reading from Luke contains another such choice. Ten lepers approach Jesus pleading for healing. Jesus heals them and gives them instruction to visit the priest so that they can be declared healed and released from their quarantine. How wonderful! It's a great story - but one of the lepers stopped on the way to join his old life. He fell down at the feet of Jesus in amazement and gratitude over his healing. He chose to be grateful.

We often condemn the 9 lepers who did not come back. They were healed. They were eager to return to their lives. They did as Jesus asked. Perhaps they wanted to see loved ones - perhaps they wanted to find work. We don't know. They did nothing wrong or sinful - and yet Jesus tells us that the gratitude the one expressed made him well. The word, "well" confuses us because the leper is already healed. However, the word in Greek really means "saved." It's as if gratitude expressed heals the man in both body and soul. He is not simply disease free - he is also saved.

Poets often point us to such moments of astonishment. They remind us to stop in our busyness and pay attention to the present moment. "What we need is here," Wendell Berry writes. Parker Palmer observes, "In one way or another, every wisdom tradition I know says that what we need is here. It's just a matter of opening our eyes and appreciating what some call "secrets hidden in plain sight." Palmer realizes that "we can't do that when we're obsessing about the past or the future, or about what we don't have, or allowing a thousand distractions to prevent us from noticing the gift of "here and now."ⁱⁱ

Mary Oliver says our paying attention is the main work of our lives. "My work is loving the world./Let me keep my mind on what matters/ which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished./which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart."ⁱⁱⁱ Our life's work is not to be the best teacher or doctor or lawyer - our life's work is to love this world God has given us and to be continually astonished with the beauty and wonder of our lives and the world around us. Poet William Stafford asks, "What can anyone give you greater than now?" Because "What we need is here."

Theologian David Lose reminds us that gratitude is a spiritual practice. "It becomes easier to choose when we practice it. Gratitude, like faith and hope and love and commitment, are not inborn traits that some have and others don't, but rather gratitude is more like a muscle that can be strengthened over time. And as we practice giving thanks and more frequently share our gratitude, we not only grow in gratitude but create an example for others."^{iv} More than that, we create a climate in which it is easier to be grateful and encourage those around us to see the blessings all around us. Singer/songwriter Carrie Newcomer writes that "Every night before I go to sleep/I say out loud/Three things that I'm grateful for/All the significant, insignificant/Extraordinary, ordinary stuff of my life./It's a small practice and humble,/And yet, I find I sleep better/Holding what lightens and softens my life/Ever so briefly at the end of the day."^v Practicing gratitude seems almost too simple - almost too glib - and yet, as Newcomer reminds us, it changes everything about us.

A few years ago, I began the practice of walking through my garden and taking pictures of what was blooming that day. Some days the blooms are magnificent and readily visible. Other days, I have to search to find the small beauty of a violet opening. These walks help me find the truth to Wendell Berry's words - what I need is right here - my work is truly about being astonished by creation - and when I realize such splendor - the rest of my life follows in great measure. Gratitude pushes back cynicism and despair. Gratitude helps us realize our great wealth instead of our imagined poverty. Gratitude helps us give ourselves away to something greater.

So I ask us now, Sunrise, how are you doing? --- I'm really asking --- How are you doing? Are we grateful? Let's practice that - the more we say we are grateful - the more we will live into it. The more we will really understand salvation. Alleluia. Amen.

ⁱ Sharon Salzberg, "The Hardship We Accept, The Gratitude We Choose," *On Being*, Sept. 19, 2016.

ⁱⁱ Parker Palmer, "What We Need is Here" *On Being*, June 24, 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mary Oliver, "Messenger" in *Thirst*.

^{iv} David Lose, "In the Meantime" Oct. 3, 2016.

^v Carrie Newcomer, "Three Gratuities from A Permeable Life: Poetry and Essays.