

We have this one more sermon to continue in our examination of the importance of gratitude to God. Last Sunday we saw how an orientation of gratitude or ingratitude is way more than a question of nice manners or ill; our attitude toward God in Christ shapes if not determines the way we live the rest of our life. (Each decision we make, each fork in the road we negotiate, each priority we nurture, takes us either closer to our destiny to end up being “conformed to the image of Christ” or further away from it.) We have seen how all ten lepers were cleaned up by Jesus, and whereas the nine kept on going into their new post-leprosy lives, the tenth came back to worship Jesus and to give Him thanksgiving and praise. Jesus raised him off his knees, telling him he alone of the ten had not only been made clean but “made whole”—that tenth was on his way to life in a different key, life in technicolor, life in a different magnitude from what any of the ten had known before, and from what the other nine were still going to experience.

Once we have eyes to see, we see ingratitude all around us. You know how it is among the people of Newport Beach, Huntington Beach, Costa Mesa. In your neighborhoods: have not the 10 received great material blessings? And on this Sunday morning, where are the 9? Have not the 10 living all around us received great blessings of freedom and opportunity and security? Where are the 9 this Sunday morning? Do not all of our neighbors have a conscience, and the prompting of the Holy Spirit of God inviting them Home, inviting them to be made into a new creation? Where are the 9?

So I suppose we’ll have to let the Holy Spirit keep speaking into their hearts and lives, just as He did before we came back to Jesus in more full gratitude. (Of course God is counting on us to do our committed best to help the process along in the lives of our neighbors, and I know many of you are doing this all the time: humbly trying to introduce your closest friends to our Lord; more bravely than before trying to help others around you understand that you love your church family, and why the way of gratitude to God is so important to you...)

But still this leaves *us*, dear sisters and brothers. If we have given thanks and turned our lives over to Jesus, we, too, have been “made whole.” Our lives reflect more gratitude than they used to. But do we all pray as we would like to each day, each moment? Is every one of our members within 30 miles of 611 Heliotrope here worshipping this morning in thanksgiving and praise? Are we all plugged into a small group? Did we all keep our once a year commitment to be part of our Annual Meeting a few Monday nights ago? (The wonderful thing about this church is how many of you are here to worship, are committed to a covenant group, are giving up weekends to attend the retreats, are praying more and more. These are the reasons this is an extraordinary church—and why, contrary to many churches and human institutions, the deeper you are willing to go the better it keeps getting. There is the Spirit of Jesus at the center—not internal politics, not deep secrets, not disappointment. Those of you who came to our Annual Meeting experienced this once again: a celebration, a feast of thanksgiving, good news without guile. Thanks be to God, and to so many of you.)

But the healing action of Jesus in the frontier between Samaria and Galilee still keeps asking each of us: where are you in the drama? Another way of asking this same question is this: “How are you managing in your new life with Christ?” (Same question, different ways: How effectively is your new life being lived under His authority, His

management, working out? How are you doing in your absolute and total obedience to His clear commands to you? (“Go, and show yourselves to the priests”—before there is visible evidence you have been cleansed.) How often do you well up with gratitude and thanksgiving for His having made you whole, made you totally new in His image and likeness?)

I guarantee that tenth leper did not feel far from Jesus as he was prostrating himself, worshiping literally at the feet of Jesus, grateful in every fiber of his being, overwhelmed with joy at the privilege of worshiping Jesus for the wonder He had wrought. The nine? They had received the same wonder, the same mercy. Obviously they were distant from Jesus in both geography and in spirit; they felt other things were more important than returning to give thanks and praise to the Great Physician who had cleansed them. (We all know that temptation: to receive the blessings of God and keep moving ahead with the life we choose for ourselves, too busy to worship Him each Sunday, too hectic to return to Him to give Him our thanks, our lives all over again: “We’ll get back to Him later.”)

Those nine no doubt felt grateful in a general way—and their lives would reflect it in a general way. The tenth: he was grateful in a specific way, and He was “made whole.” They were going to feel distant; the grateful one never felt more alive.

How about with you? Want to feel closer to Jesus? Here’s the pattern. Give thanks for all He has done. Give thanks for Who He is. Return to Him, now and every moment. Bow down before Him, literally or figuratively.

Want to feel closer to Jesus? Live His new life for you even more? [Myriads of things to be grateful for; I’ll choose four.] First: we remember and give thanks for the truths of our faith. Jesus has come to show us God is love, not wrath. We are to love God, not fear God. “If I go away from you all I will send My Spirit, and you’re better off with Him than with Me.” “On the third day He was raised from the dead;” “He has become the firstborn of many brothers and sisters;” “Human eye has not heard, nor ear heard, nor imagination conceived of the wonders he has in store for those who love and fear the Lord...” Our Lord shows us that evil is contained, has been defeated; that life and good and truth has triumphed over injustice and sin and evil and death; every person of every religion or no religion is invited to share in the new, overcoming, life in Christ. Each local congregation of believers is a colony of heaven in this world, to share in the joys of the Kingdom in the midst of this world.

These truths may sound like items in a creed—but they are far more than that. This is not just religion. Every one of these truths, these “religious truths” of our faith will change our lives, from this day forward, as we allow the Holy Spirit to bring them alive into our present awareness. Do we allow these truths to flood our very being? Do they bring tears of gratitude into our eyes when we remember and give thanks for all that God has done for us? Do we tremble when we return, over and over again, to ponder our inheritance beyond price as the adopted sons and daughters of the Most High King?

Want to feel closer to Jesus? Live His new life even more? Second: be thankful for our civic inheritance, our American experiment. God knows we have our faults; we constantly fail to live up to our founding consensus as a nation set apart, dedicated at the very least to obeying the precepts of Almighty God. On the one hand we face increased temptations to abuse the military power and wealth God has bestowed upon our land; a

nation powerful among the nations has trouble being faithful and humble before God just as individuals do.

On the other, we are living among an increasingly strident minority of secular fundamentalists who are forgetting or ignoring as fast as they can, and apparently intent on making everyone else also forget, that this nation whose benefits we all enjoy (not always equitably or fairly, and we honor God by doing better—but still enough to attract hundreds of thousands of immigrants each year who risk so much for even a chance at the blessings of God still available here) did not just happen upon the face of the earth but was established by the broad consensus of founders who knew how important it was to recognize and give thanks to God in private and in public. We are more and more becoming aware that not all religions are created equal, and not all religions bestow the same blessings upon their adherents or the nations in which their adherents live. No nation can long survive spitting in the face of the One who has granted such freedoms, such prosperity, such hope, such tolerance to so many.

Want to feel closer to Jesus? To live His new life even more? Third: remember how we all have received “common” grace. (Grace from God is never common—how dare we become so blasé that we are not awed simply to be alive!) I clearly remember an observation from my friend Tim Noonan 30 years ago in Florida. Tim was musing: “What if we had just one day to be alive and aware? Think how totally, circuit-blowingly overwhelmed we would be: the sunlight, the flowers, the rain, just one bird singing. One star twinkling. The sweetness of just one fresh tangerine to eat. The cool breeze on a hot day. If there were just one pretty girl in a tennis dress to see—Wow! But God has given us not only one day to be alive and aware—God has given us a lifetime of days. So what do we do? Instead of doing what any decent person would do, giving God glory and honor, thanking Him all the time, no—we go thru our days like toilet paper, one after another, unaware, stewing in our own little dramas, preoccupied with our silly problems, throwing our personal tantrums, taking everything for granted as if there were nothing to it. How could we be so unappreciative, so stupid, so dead to it all?” [You can see why I remember his thoughts even today.]

Christian or not—the decent thing to do is to thank God, the giver of all our gifts. God is the Author of this “common grace” which comes with our being alive. [You remember the primordial temptation, going back to the Garden of Eden and the serpent: “Go ahead, you don’t have to obey God. Go ahead and eat from the forbidden tree, and you shall be like God!” [Gen 3:6] God gives us free will, and at moments we still forget—we may still try to make ourselves the center of the cosmic drama; forget, and pretend my life is “all about me.” No wonder life is increasingly combative or meaningless and boring and disappointing to death for tens of millions of Westerners who have received such abundant blessings from the hand of God in every department—if I live like there’s no God, or I am God, how interesting, how permanent, could it all turn out? (Fortunately, all of you know better. God makes a better God than I do. God makes a better God than you do, or any person or ideology or religion does.) So we give thanks and praise to the real God—Giver of the “common grace” available to all.]

Want to feel closer to Jesus? Live more in His new life? Fourth: remember and give thanks for “specific grace” you have encountered. Those lepers had a big problem, a specific problem. They were lepers! They called out, boldly: “Have mercy on us! [You can see—we are lepers and we need specific help!”] Only you know the many, many

ways in which God has delivered you from your own specific problems and predicaments. Financial worries. Health scares. The temptation to be broken and give up when the health scare proved a health danger—maybe even the death of a loved one. Addictions, destructive patterns of living. Self-absorption. Anger, fear, resentment, etc, etc, etc...Am I the only one who has lived in the bottom of the Pit, despising myself and those days of my existence—at least for a time? (I didn't think so.) (Or, in a felicitous phrase, one of my friends speaks of a time after her divorce when she was walking and living on the wild side for a while—she talks of enduring that phase of “her personal purgatory.”)

Rehearsing examples God's “specific grace” to us to deliver us out of the Pit in which we once found ourselves, our “personal purgatory,” is no guarantee that our lives change for the better any more than was His “specific grace” to the other nine. We still have to keep choosing gratitude. [You've heard the old joke about the grandmother who was taking her grandson to the beach. The little lad, who could barely swim, wandered out farther and farther into the deep until a huge wave swept him far ashore, dragging him under, far, far beyond her ability or the lifeguards' possibly to save him. So she prayed like crazy, got down on her knees and shamelessly begged God to rescue little Tommy. Within moments the currents changed, a giant wave lifted Tommy up to the surface and swept him smoothly right back thru the pounding surf, gently placing him on the sand at his grandmother's feet. Not two seconds later: “And...he was wearing a yellow baseball hat!”]

The life of Martin Luther was no joke. He started out as a bright young man, son of poor but very hard-working parents who sacrificed mightily for him to go to Law School. One day he was caught in the middle of an open field, as a torrential lightning storm zapped all around him. He, too, is said to have prostrated himself in the mud, promising the Master he would live his life for Jesus if he made it out of that field alive. He did and he did.

Now *there* was a man who lived his life for the Master: Luther took on the most powerful institution in the world, he risked his life first dramatically and then constantly; he would not be deterred or shut up. God used the bold willingness of Martin Luther to change the outcome of Western history for the better in a way equaled by few if any in these past few centuries.

Luther's gratitude to God for His “specific grace” puts him in the company of that grateful and cheerful leper who threw himself face down at the feet of Jesus. At that moment he handed over his dignity, his autonomy, the management of his life, and the keys to his future back into the hands of his new Lord.

But see how the picture ends. Once he has turned his life over to Jesus, Jesus does not allow him to stay down, prostrate at His feet. “Get up! Go on your *new* way—My way for you, entered into by your gratitude! You've been given a whole new life, new future—not just plastic surgery. So get up! Start living—now!”

So with Martin Luther. God did not allow him to stay down there on the ground for long. “Get up! Your faith has made you whole!” He was made whole, given a whole new life. Once we turn our lives over to God, once we worship Him with as much of our being as we are able to offer Him, He does not let us grovel. He has work for us to do together! [On the contrary—it's when we try to live as our own god, sure my life is “all about me” that we may end up at the end of the line, then having to grovel—but in defeat,

overcome, brought to our knees by our idols, our habits, our presuppositions, fears, our far too small godlets.]

The living God, the only One worthy of our worship, is the one who raises us up out of our submission: “Get up! I’ve got a new life for you, a new Way, with far different joys and growth and challenges than ever you dreamed. And I will be with you, within you, thru My Spirit, thru every step, every challenge, every prayer, every bout of spiritual amnesia. Get up! Your faith has made you whole.” You are each one of you then “sent out” into your new God-directed life—(but this is not a sermon about ‘vocatio’—your faithfulness to the direction and substance of the new life God has in mind uniquely, personally, for you.)

All this is true, very true, and it’s simple. You will feel closer to Him as you keep coming back to Him to worship Him; as you keep remembering the many blessings you have received from God. Don’t worry; if you will hand your life over to Him, He will command you to get up, will send you on your new way. Into His new life for you.

But so far we haven’t come to the first reason we have the high honor of worshipping Jesus, of returning to Him full of gratitude, giving Him thanks.

What’s your guess? (First clue: it’s not “all about me.”) Worshiping God is about God. I’m not always faithful in my response, but still I remind all of you as I remind myself: you and I can bring cheer and joy to our Lord. [2x]

Surely the ingratitude of the nine must have discouraged Jesus, just a bit? (It didn’t stop Him, didn’t slow Him down: but do you think He didn’t notice?) Surely the return of the one cheered and encouraged Him. Did we think He does not notice our response? Is He not encouraged by even the imperfect allegiance we offer Him? Is He not moved by how we keep coming back to Him, keep living our lives for Him? [I know it makes no sense that the One who had a hand in the creation of the universe should become so vulnerable that our loyalty or our forgetfulness actually cheers or disappoints Him. But that’s what love means—to choose to become vulnerable—that’s what the Incarnation means—that God has chosen to put Himself in the position where our gratitude, our actions, our lives affect Him so greatly. [Believe it or not.]

Remember the gifts your kindergartener brought home for you, something from her heart? How did you feel? (Did you need that gift, one more decoration for the refrigerator?) Two Wednesdays ago one of our Logos children brought me a hand-picked yellow flower she had found down by the soccer fields where we were playing. I was so grateful for the flower, for the thoughtfulness behind it! [A “mini-hallelujah,”] A boy offering to help his dad doing some chores may only be getting in the way—but how such pure and heartfelt love melts the heart of the parents, and it evokes a flood of love in return. So it is between us and God: our heartfelt pure love, our grateful lives, provokes love in the heart of God. You and I have the capacity to warm the heart of God—can you imagine?

See the life of Jesus. It was lonely and hard—hard hearts and misunderstanding and dead ends and disappointments wherever He turned. Sure, He constantly prayed to His only audience, His Father, and He got thru His life in perfect obedience—but the loyalty of His friends meant so much to Him nonetheless. He chose His twelve for many strategic reasons, but first we are told by Mark [3:13] so that “they might be with Him.”

They blundered, they constantly missed the point, they showed their little faith time and again—and still it encouraged Him to have them around.

When things got unbearable for Him, as the shadow of the cross loomed darker that final week of His earthly life—He returned each night to the home of His friends in Bethany. He asked Peter and James and John to please accompany Him into the Garden of Gethsemane during His final wrestling, just one more time, with the will of the Father. (Some of you may remember a similar scene in the Narnia movie—do see it if you haven't yet—in which Aslan, sorrowful, knowing, must trudge to His death at the ancient Stone Table. Lucy and Susan can't sleep, they're so distraught for him, and they see him beginning to make his fatal walk. "May we come with you, Aslan?" Two girls—what good could they be to the Mighty Aslan? But any of you parents know how he responded: something like "It would cheer me if you would come with me a while..." What good could you or I possibly be to our Redeemer, the Christ of God? Don't ever forget: it cheers our Lord beyond measure when you choose to live with Him, for Him.)

Imagine, as He lay dying on the cross, the last stop of His faithful journey, when all had forsaken Him, all was black, desolate, agony—and there pierced the darkness from beside Him the humble recognition and the pitiful cry of a creature also living his final earthly moments. "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom..." [Luke 23:42] Surely that man's plea came as a timely and specific gift to the Son: all was not lost; His life had not been all for naught, the salvation of the world had begun in this most unlikely wretch—the promised victory had indeed begun, and Jesus heard its confirmation even as He lay dying on the cross.

Never underestimate the good effect your worship, your prayer, your obedience, your new life has in the heart of your Savior.

Luke 17:11-19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests."

And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."