

“The Power of Gratitude” by Rev. Judy Bagley-Bonner

Luke 17:11-19

This morning, a couple of thoughts on gratitude, which will fall under two basic headings: Firstly, that gratitude is good for us and for the world. Secondly, that its opposite, entitlement and complaint, is bad for us and for the wider world.. So we start with the fact that gratitude, far from being a mere cliché, a sentimental topic or a perfunctory habit of just saying thank you, has become the stuff of modern science and psychology. The University of California at Berkley, for example, did a massive study on the science of gratitude, looking at changes in brain chemistry and other physical, measurable changes that occur in people who intentionally incorporate specific gratitude practices into their lives. If you are interested, the particulars are available on a website called “The Science of Gratitude.” And the University of California is not alone. Indeed, there is apparently a good deal of NIH funded research occurring on the power of gratitude to improve health and well being for individuals as well as for organizational climates. It seems to relate closely to things like Appreciative Inquiry and Positive Psychology, both movements that suggest that there is reason to begin analysis of any entity, be it an individual’s psyche or an organization’s culture, by looking first for what is positive, what is healthy and strong and working well in that entity, rather than approaching assessments always by looking for the problems, always starting with what’s wrong or broken or lacking. *Because starting with gratitude, even for the little things, can change our lives. I think I have mentioned before that I have long had a simple practice, as part of my daily spiritual practice, of looking for, and then lingering over, five specific things for which to be grateful. They are usually little things, like the lovely view of Bradenton from the green bridge when you are driving south and look to the west. It is a charming picture of clay rooftops and English looking chimneys and colorful buildings, all beside the expansive river. Once I put it on my gratitude list, I noticed that I appreciate that view pretty much every time I see it. No matter*

*what my day is like, it gives me a little shot of well being. Or my list might indeed include bigger things, like the fact that a category 4 hurricane stayed out to sea and spared thousands of the lives it was supposed to desimate. Gratitude, as a way of life, a basic approach and way of seeing is very powerful. Its not just a matter of saying a perfunctory thank you, its a whole orientation toward life. You can tell the people who have it, by the way. They usually have a quiet contentment about them, a graciousness which brings out the best in those around them. Far from being Pollyannas, they are able to enter into the painful parts of life with a depth and quietude of soul whose very presence can help to bring healing. As an aside, that's what I think Jesus's healing stories are about, that he was so immersed in, and full of , the gracious love of God, so whole and full of love, that those around him could not help but be changed. So gratitude , including a conscious cultivation of it in our individual lives and the communities we are a part of, is good for us, and a lack of it makes us entitled, picky, judgmental and a pain in the neck to be around.*

*For this, I turn again to one of my favorite authors, Eckhart Tolle, whose book A New Earth includes a whole section on one of the opposites of gratitude: complaint. Now again, this can sound shallow and perfunctory, as if a few complaints along the way really constitute a serious, spiritual malady. But again, he is talking about a whole orientation to life that deeply affects our way of seeing everything. To some extent, it comes naturally to us. Our minds are by nature, always judging and assesing; always categorizing everything into boxes basically marked good or bad. And oh, what an adrenaline hit we get when we can judge something as bad and feel all superior about it. This is not to say there is never a time to complain. Tolle tells the story of ordering a bowl of soup and having it served cold. An appropriate complaint, in his view, is to say to the server, calmly, "my soup is cold and I am hoping you can warm it up." But how often do we put on the indignant voice, start noticing everything else that is wrong with the restaurant, and work ourselves into a self righteous fuss? And Tolle goes on to say that a long standing complaint could be called a grievance, and to carry a grievance is to be in a permanent state of "against." It is kept alive by compulsive thinking and by telling the story over and over. He*

*points out that communities and even nations have collective greivances, and that these can stay alive for centuries in the collective psyche of a nation or tribe, and fuel a never ending cycle of violence.*

*You see, its all about your basic way of seeing and what you choose to focus on. Yes there are things that need to be changed in our lives and our wider world, but approaching them from a place of grace and positivity, as much as possible, can only help the change making process in the long run.*

Another opposite of gratitude is entitlement, and it's also bad for us and for the wider community. When we notice it in children, we call them spoiled. When we notice it in adults we call them ego maniacs. And once again, its antidote is gratitude. For one thing, gratitude increases humility. It reminds us that we did not come to where we are in life entirely on our own. Most of us have had advantages and help along the way, even if just the advantage of good genes or a quick mind or a resilient personality. It has been said that gratitude is a function, not of how much we have, but rather of how much we have relative to how much we feel we deserve. If we feel entitled to the blessings in our lives, it presumes we achieved them all on our own. And as Brian has been wont to say, it's like we were born on third base but think we hit a triple. This is particularly seen in today's text in that it was only the Samaritan, part of the despised, disenfranchised group, who came back to say thank you. It would be like if ten were healed in my wealthy, white home town in suburban Ohio, and one was what? homeless? gay or trans gender? Mexican? African American? Well, that person in our story was the only one who came back. For the rest, the healing was just part of what they had come to expect for those born on third base. They unconsciously felt entitled and it didn't even occur to them to be grateful.

Now don't get me wrong, a healthy sense of pride is perfectly appropriate regarding our accomplishments, but maybe we need to remember a little more often that but for the tiniest turn of the destiny dial, or whatever you want to call it, it easily could have been otherwise. Indeed, gratitude is a close sibling to humility. And the leavening combination of the two make us far more bearable as people, both to others and I think, to ourselves. Says Melanie Greenberg, Ph.D. "Experiencing and expressing gratitude is an important part of any spiritual practice. It opens the heart and activates positive emotion centers in the brain. Regular practice of gratitude can change the way our brain neurons fire into more positive automatic patterns. The positive emotions it evokes can soothe distress and broaden our thinking patterns so we develop a larger and more expansive view of our lives. And from Johannes A. Gaertner "To speak gratitude is courteous and pleasant, to enact gratitude is generous and noble, but to live gratitude is to touch Heaven." And still more concisely, from Ralph H. Blum, "there is a calmness to a life lived in Gratitude, a quiet, palpable joy."

And so I am suggesting today that we cultivate a general, spiritual posture of living from gratitude. And again, this is not about just adding the perfunctory "thank you" to a good deed rendered on your behalf. It's about really learning to notice, and really learning to linger, over the good stuff in life...the simple blessings and delights along the way, and the good we see in one another. We need intentionally to cultivate this as we do other disciplines and habits, by decision and effort, by training ourselves to look for specific things for which to be grateful, and then by stopping to savor them. I am not suggesting here that we ignore the pain and suffering when they come. Indeed they, too, need to be named and faced, and there is also a time to lament. But in the long run, I think we can counter-balance the pain, by learning to linger over the joy, by learning not to take it for granted, by learning to oil the machinery of life with this gladsome, leavening balm .

And so I would like to close these thoughts by asking you to take a moment now to call to mind something or someone or some situation where you have particular gratitude. Think about the particulars involved, the specific parts and pieces, open your heart to it, and let the feelings involved

wash over you. And now, one further part to the challenge, speak it! As we have so painfully been reminded this week by the sudden death of one of our dear, relatively young folks, and cliché as it may be, speak your gratitude to those you love now, today because you never know how long you'll be able to. Speak it to the person involved if there is one, or just speak about it to someone, just to put that good energy out there. What if our world were shot through and lubricated with the oil of shared gratitude instead of the entitled, complaining, grievance driven incivility we too often see?

May we be like that tenth leper who took the time and energy to come back and speak his gratitude, because by that, we could help change the world.