

Sermon: Rev Susanna Pain
14/10/07

Luke 17:11-19 Gratitude

As a teenager, at Youth Group we used to sing *'I've got that joy, joy, joy deep in my heart... deep in my heart to stay'*

But I didn't feel it, that joy, and I wondered whether I was missing something.

It's taken me a long time to grow into joy, maybe it's my personality, maybe I needed to mature? I don't know, maybe it's about expectations or accepting where I'm at. I think attitude has something to do with it.

I wonder about those lepers who were outcasts, only able to associate with each other. They called out to Jesus for help, and followed his directions to go to the priest – and miraculously they were healed – but only one came back to say thank you. One came back to praise God. One was open to deeper healing and change? And he was an outsider. I wonder how each of their lives would have been after their healings?

I imagine one thankful, but grudgingly resentful and finding fault.

Why do I have to do this? Mutter, mutter, 'I've been sick all this time. How am I going to make ends meet?' Contrast the man who came back – a Samaritan, who had no priest to show – free in spirit, thankful, praising, appreciating.

I know which is more attractive. So I ask, how do I live my life? In hard times and in good? Am I able to give thanks in each moment? Meister Eckhart, thirteenth century mystic writes *'If the only prayer you say in your entire life is thank you that would be suffice'*.

Paul, in writing to Timothy, is in prison, chained for what he believed. I've never been in chains. Not pleasant I imagine, yet he finds it in him to be faithful and even to count his blessings.

The prophet Jeremiah counsels those in exile to pray for their captors – to go on living and seeking the welfare of those around.

Gratitude does not come easily for most of us. Our culture is bent on economic growth. And economic growth is dependent upon the constant stimulation of our appetites to want more. But we are not the centre of the universe. (p61 Daily readings from Spiritual classics ed. Paul Ofstedal)

Once upon a time there was a man who was struck down in his early thirties who was diagnosed with brain cancer. He had a wife and young children and a promising career. Suddenly all of that was swept away from him. He could barely talk or walk. He was in constant agony. His friends and his family, except for his wife and mother, avoided him. The doctors shook their heads. It

was too bad. He was a nice man and deserved longer life. But there was nothing they could do. At last he went to a famous doctor who offered to operate on him, even though everyone else said the tumour was inoperable. The doctor warned the patient and his wife that he could very well die during the operation, though he (the doctor) was pretty sure that he would survive and return to health. They decided that they should take the risk. After nine hours of surgery, the doctor came into the waiting room, grinned at the man's wife and said, "Got it!" The man recovered and went on to a happy and successful life. Twenty years later the surgeon died. We should go to the funeral and the wake the patient's wife said. I'd like to, her husband replied. But it's on the weekend and I have an important golf tournament. (Internet source, by Andrew Greeley)

There's gratitude for you.

Contrast this. A long time ago, I heard Jean Houston tell a story about herself as a young woman, going to hear a presentation by Helen Keller who was blind and deaf. Houston said that after Helen Keller finished speaking she knew that she had to talk with her. She got up and presented her face to Helen Keller. Jean Houston described the experience like this. 'She read my whole face and I blurted out 'Miss, Keller, why are you so happy?' and she laughed and laughed, saying: 'My child, it is because I live each day as if it were my last and life, with all its moments, is so full of glory!' (p 145 *The Cup of our Life, A guide for spiritual growth*, Joyce Rupp)

As many of you know, I am involved in Interplay – improvised dance, storytelling and song, a series of tools for living. It has been so life giving for me – nothing you can do in Interplay is judged.

Those who witness others perform are invited to look for the good, notice what they enjoy – how refreshing is that?

And those who perform are invited to be present and find what they enjoy – what a different way viewing the world. Some schooled in critical analysis find it difficult to look for the good. There's plenty of criticism out there, but it is a challenge, a spiritual discipline, if you like, to seek what is good in another, in yourself and affirm that.

This attitude quickly builds trust and community.

What is happening in my life?

What is going on in this community? Where would you affirm??

In what are you thankful?

The practice of the presence of God, giving thanks in all circumstances is not easy.

It is not saccharine. It's hard work sometimes to praise God. It takes persistence, effort...

I'm not talking about denying the pain. I'm talking about an attitude of being in it.

But, gratitude like any other good thing can become addictive, be resisted, and be used for manipulation. There are some people who give compulsively because deep down they need to be needed. They are always helping, even if the other persons do not need or ask for help. Gratitude and affirmation has become a drug for which they crave because of their own insecurity. Recently, I asked a friend to recommend a plumber to me. He then added, "if you praise and thank him enough for his work, he probably will not charge you for it." There are others who resent being in need and so also resent the person who helps them. Mark Twain wrote, "if you pick up a starving dog and make him prosperous, he will not bite you. This is the principal difference between a dog and a human being." For these people, expressing gratitude is a sign of weakness and seen as something that makes themselves vulnerable. Gratitude like all beautiful things can be used also for manipulation. An act of kindness can be done, not to help the other, but to imprison them in a web of gratitude. Parents often use gratitude to manipulate their children. It then becomes a vice rather than a virtue. (unknown internet source)

The leper gave thanks – *Eucharist*

It is amazing, isn't it; we can miss so much of life? The key to gratitude is surprise. When we use our sensitivity to wonder and awe, when we simply trudge or zoom through the days, we can so easily miss the daily gifts of life. When we awaken to what is within us and around us, when we savour, relish, and taste life fresh each day, our heart holds much more gratitude for our blessings.

Andrew Harvey writes that if we were really looking at the world, we would be moved a hundred times a day by the flowers at the side of the road, the people we meet, by all that brings us messages of our own goodness and the goodness of all things. To be grateful (*Eucharist* – give thanks) is to affirm goodness wherever we find it. The problem with being grateful is not the lack of countless blessings; the problem is being inattentive and unaware of these blessings. (Rupp p. 46)

One practice that has helped to reawaken gratitude when my thankfulness has grown lean is to take one of my five external senses each day and be attentive to it. One day I notice all the sounds that I hear; another day I pay close attention to everything I see etc.

Doing this helps me move out of my tired approach to life. I restore my alertness to my daily gifts and begin again to see the universe as one vast blessing.

Are you living your life right now? Or are you still waiting for it to happen?
(Joyce Rupp p 146)

'If the only prayer you say in your entire life is thank you that would suffice.'
