

Sermon 13 October Gratitude

Luke 17:11-19

Rachel Naomi Remen in her book 'My Grandfather's Blessings' (p77f) tells a story of times spent with her grandfather. She writes:

Many years ago my Grandfather gave me a silver wine goblet so small that it holds no more than a thimbleful of wine. Exquisitely engraved into its bowl is a bow with long ribbon streamers. It was made in Russia long ago. He gave it to me during one of the many afternoons when we sat together at the kitchen table in my parents' home memorizing phrases from his old books and discussing the nature of life. I was quite young then no more than five or six, and when I became restless, he would revive my attention by bringing out the sacramental Concord grape juice he kept in the back of the refrigerator. He would fill my little beribboned wineglass with Manishevitz and then put a splash of wine into his own ceremonial cup, generations old. Then we would offer a toast together. At the time, the only other celebration I knew was singing "Happy Birthday" and blowing out the candles. I loved this even better.

My grandfather has taught me the toast we used. It was a single Hebrew word, *L'Chiam*, which he told me meant "To Life!" He always said it with enthusiasm. "Is it to a happy life, Grandpa?" I had asked him once. He had shaken his head no. "It is just "To Life!" Neshumele," he told me.

At first, this did not make a lot of sense to me, and I struggled to understand his meaning. "Is it like a prayer?" I asked uncertainly.

"Ah no, Neshume-le," he told me. "We pray for the things we don't have. We already have life."

"But then why do we say this before we drink the wine?" He smiled at me fondly. "Grandpa!" I said, suddenly suspicious. "Did you make it up?" He chuckled and assured me that he had not. For thousands of years all over the world people have said this same word to each other before drinking wine together. It was a Jewish tradition.

I puzzled about this last for some time. "Is it written in the Bible, Grandpa?" I asked at last. "No, Neshume-le", he said, "it is written in people's hearts." Seeing the confusion on my face, he told me that *L'Chiam!* meant that no matter what difficulty life brings, no matter how hard or painful or unfair life is, life is holy and worthy of celebration. "Even the wine is sweet to remind us that life itself is a blessing."

She continues, "It has been almost fifty-five years since I last heard my grandfather's voice, but I remember the joy with which he toasted Life and the twinkle in his eye as he said *L'Chiam!* It has always seemed remarkable to me that such a toast could be offered for generations by a people for whom life has not been easy. But perhaps it can only be said by such people, and only those who have lost and suffered can truly understand its power.

L'Chiam is a way of living life. As I've grown older, it seems less and less about celebrating life and more about the wisdom of choosing life. In the many years I have been counselling people with cancer, I have seen people choose life again and again, despite loss and pain and difficulty. The same immutable joy I saw in my grandfather's eyes is there in them all."

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p77-78 *L'Chiam*, the toast to life is less about celebrating life than choosing life, "even the wine is sweet to remind us that life itself is a

blessing!" said Rachel's Grandfather. I love that. "Life itself is a blessing."

I wonder, what does it mean for you to choose life in the middle of your present circumstances?

I think of the Samaritan, the spurned foreigner, the one healed leper who turned back to say thanks? Is there a hint here about his wholeness? He chose life!

What makes him different? What makes him become the teacher, and the others disappear?

Earlier in Luke we heard of a single Leper healed... Here there were ten.

Loosely based on Loader:

What is different in this story? Only one said, "Thank you!" Did Luke have a low view of lepers? Many did.

The nine healed lepers go off apparently ungrateful. Only one returns. Do you remember your parents saying, "Don't forget to say, 'Thank you!'" That is harmless enough. Is that all there is to it?

Shock, horror, and he was a Samaritan! Not so surprising really since Jesus is passing through Galilee and Samaria. The point is not one about demography however, but about norms and prejudices. You wouldn't expect a Samaritan to say, 'Thank you!', because 'you all know what Samaritans are like.' This forms a pair with the parable of the good Samaritan. Luke is subverting a racist stereotype. In Jesus' words the man is a foreigner, someone of another race.

It should not be difficult to find parallels in our own communities. Media images reinforce a stereotype of Muslims as violent and dangerous. "You all know what Muslims are like" was a common

response after the bombings. Or in this part of the world we hear that asylum seekers are just people jumping the so called queue, wanting to come here to live, although in fact they are mostly people fleeing the injustices we otherwise deplore. These are simple but devastating prejudices.

Rubbing the salt in, Luke has Jesus announce that this tenth leper, the Samaritan, has been made whole, a image of full salvation, the very aspiration of the best people who would seek to avoid Samaritans and others who today might be written off as Palestinians. Similarly the Samaritan who came to the aid of the traveller lying beaten up on the roadside embodied the heart of Torah: loving one's neighbour.

My childhood lesson about saying, "Thank you!", went only part of the way. The leper did come back to say, "Thank you!" to Jesus, but it is interesting that this, too, is rephrased. According to Jesus he returned to give glory to God. "Thanking Jesus = giving glory to God. Therefore Jesus is God." Yes and no, and certainly not as simply as that sounds. But it does reflect where Jesus' priorities lay.

Giving glory to God, recognising that in Jesus, God was in action. The Samaritan's focusing on God was what made it appropriate for Jesus to declare the man's wholeness in a broader sense. True worship is recognising where God is active and acknowledging when the reign of God is in our midst. So the wrong kind of worshipper according to common prejudice is giving the right kind of worship. As the good Samaritan embodies love for neighbour, so this good Samaritan embodies love for God. Together they embody the twofold centre of Torah, the Jewish Law... Love God and love your neighbour as yourself.

The story is deliberately subversive. Lepers were not very respectable and Samaritans were despised by many. Suddenly one of them, a leper, and Samaritan at that, becomes our high priest, as it were, our model of salvation. And those who belong get it wrong. A simple but disturbing story that lives itself out in every generation.

<http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkPentecost21.htm>

'Love God and love your neighbour as yourself.

18 'Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' 19 Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'

Rachel Naomi Remen tells another story (p116 - 119) of a client, a great oncology surgeon who came to her burnt out, and ready to leave his occupation. After a few sessions of counselling, she invited him to try something, an experiment, using some wisdom from Angeles Arrien's book 'The Fourfold Way'. "Less expensive than Prozac", she told him.

She invited him to review the events of his day for fifteen minutes every evening, asking himself three questions and writing down the answers to these questions in a journal.

The three questions are:

What surprised me today?

What moved me or touched me today?

What inspired me today?

It is a bit like the exam I talked about a few weeks ago, 'For what am I most grateful? For what am I least grateful?'

She says, 'The key thing is reliving the day from a new perspective and not the amount of time spent writing about it'...

A few days later, the surgeon called her. "I don't like to fail at things. Is there a trick to this?"

She laughed "Perhaps you are still looking at your life in the old ways, Try looking at the people around you as if you were a novelist, a journalist, or maybe a poet. Look for the stories.".... "Right" he said.

She didn't hear from him again for ages. When she did, he told her how things had changed in his life:

"At the beginning," he said, "I couldn't talk about it and I just wrote everything down. But I think when I began to see things differently, my attitude started to change. Maybe that showed in my tone of voice or in some other way. People seemed to pick up on it because their attitude seemed to change too. And after a while, I just began talking to people about more than their cancer and its treatment. I began talking about what I could see."...

She concludes: 'Most of us lead far more meaningful lives than we know, Often finding meaning is not about doing things differently; it is about seeing familiar things in new ways. When we find new eyes, the unsuspected blessing in work we have done for many years may take us completely by surprise. We can see life in many ways: with the eye, with the mind, with the intuition. But perhaps it is only by those who speak the language of meaning, who have remembered how to see with the heart, that life is ever deeply known or served.'

The surgeon said he was now "listening to hearts."

I say, "L'Chiam!" "To Life!" Likke the Samaritan, and Rachel's grandfather, Choose life, then things change.

Rachel Naomi Remen (p72 'My Grandfather's Blessings') offers this old prayer:

'Days pass and the years vanish and we walk sightless among miracles. Lord, fill our eyes with seeing and our minds with knowing. Let there be moments when your Presence, like lightning, illuminates the darkness in which we walk. Help us to see, wherever we gaze, that the bush burns, unconsumed. And we, clay touched by God, will reach out for holiness and exclaim in wonder: How filled with awe is this place and we did not know it.'

God is surprising and teaches us through unlikely people and places...
'Here's to Life!'

Susanna Pain

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