

“A Grateful Life”
Luke 17:11-19
33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 18, 2018
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

We are nearing the end of our fall sermon series on “Words of Faith.”

And our word for this morning is “grateful”.

The late preacher Fred Craddock once remarked that “gratitude is the central virtue of the Christian life...I’ve never known,” he says, “I’ve never known a person who was grateful who was, at the same time, mean or small or bitter or hurtful. Not when you’re grateful.”¹

With this being the weekend before Thanksgiving, I imagine that most of us will, at some time this week, think about what and who we’re grateful for...

So I’d like you to consider three different kinds of gratitude, three layers.

Anne Lamott writes “...most of the time for me gratitude is a rush of relief that I dodged a bullet—the highway patrol guy didn’t notice me speed by, or...it was all a dream...I didn’t appear on Oprah in underpants with my dreadlocks dropping off my head.”²

This is what I’ll call SURFACE gratitude.
We all know it.

The recurring dream I have is that it’s Sunday morning, and OH NO—I forgot to write a sermon this week! And it’s five minutes before worship, and I’m not ready, but I’m walking into the sanctuary...and then I wake up, whew...it’s only Friday morning!

We say thank you, we exhale, and we move on.

¹ From Fred Craddock’s sermon, “Does Money Carry Germs?”, found in *The Collected Sermon of Fred B. Craddock*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

² Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*, New York: Riverhead Books, 2012.

Dig a little deeper with me, though...because gratitude is about more than being relieved.

Hailey Bartholomew is the creator of a website called 365grateful.com. She started this site in response to a problem in her own life.

Back in 2008, Hailey says that she was married, had two lovely children, but she was depressed. She could not figure out what was wrong. So she went and spoke with a nun, who suggested that Hailey spend 10 days focusing on reflection and gratitude...identifying something every day for which she was grateful.

Hailey did that, and realized she needed much more than 10 days.

So she started her own gratitude discipline, by taking a picture of something every day that gave her a feeling of gratitude.

- One day it might be the color green—she took pictures of all these different shades of green.
- Or it might be her 3-year-old daughter trying to be grown up, saying, “Mommy, let me help you down this step.”

A turning point came when she took a picture of her husband serving dinner. She says that her husband had always struck her as the LEAST romantic person ever...he never brought her flowers, he never took her on dates.

That evening, when she took the photo, she realized that her husband wasn't just giving her a piece of pie. He was giving her the BIGGEST piece of pie.

And then she realized that this is what he always did—
 when they drove somewhere,
 she noticed that he would hold her hand,
 or when it was their children's bedtime,
 he would sing their daughter to sleep with a ukulele.

He was always thinking of others.
 She just hadn't seen it before.

Hailey's gratitude project took off—it got written about, and people learned of it, and it's had an impact on many, many other lives. One mother who had lost a

child wrote to Hailey and said that Hailey's 365grateful project got that mother through her grief.

In other words, other people's lives have changed, and Hailey Bartholomew's life has changed—because of the simplest thing:

The daily NAMING of gifts. A daily practice of gratitude.³

So...there's gratitude as relief—surface gratitude.
And gratitude as a discipline—daily acts of gratitude.

What about another level?
How about the gratitude that comes from being RESCUED?
When God sends someone into our lives to do for us...what we could not do for ourselves???

This is, I think, what our text for today is all about.

So many sermons on this text are about scolding the nine lepers who failed to return. Don't be like the nine, be like the one who came back.

Where are the nine???
But I don't think this text requires a scolding sermon.
I think it requires a grateful sermon.

The Samaritan with leprosy, the one who returned to thank Jesus...imagine, for just a moment, what this person's life was like.

Can you imagine it?

Perhaps he had a good life, a full life, a wife and 3 beautiful children and a job that paid well...that was before the disease...but then he develops this disease, this devastating disease, and it's on his skin for everyone to see, and the priest tells

³ As told by Hailey Bartholomew in her TED Talk, found at <http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/365-Grateful-Project-%7C-Hailey-B>.

him he's UNCLEAN, and society tells him he's UNCLEAN, and his friends are no longer his friends because he's UNCLEAN.

And he has to go live in this colony of other people with the same disease...on the outskirts of society, shunned by society, and he has lost FOREVER the life that he once had.⁴

Imagine that.

And then imagine the day that Jesus comes walking through.

The Samaritan, he's heard about Jesus, he knows the reports...that Jesus has healed other people. And he's scared. What is he scared of? He's scared to hope. He's scared to hope, but deep down he hopes, that maybe...just maybe...Jesus can work a miracle in his life too.

So he shouts out with all the others: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

And Jesus looks at them.

And Jesus does not walk by them...like everyone else walks by them.

And Jesus says to all ten of them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests."

And all 10...the text doesn't say this, but I can picture it.

The ten...I imagine that they all look at one another.

They look at one another like, "Did he really say that? Is this really happening?"

And then the text says that they start walking toward the priests.

And then the text says: "...as they went, they were made clean."

I want you to picture that moment.

The moment that those 10 children of God are healed. The moment that this Samaritan, this person who was an outcast among outcasts, this child of God who thought he had lost everything...I want you to picture the moment that he saw that his leprosy was GONE.

The moment that he realized...**I just got my life back.**

⁴ I am indebted to a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Steve Eason for giving me the idea for this exegesis and this sermon.

Has it ever happened to you?

Maybe some of you here today once took your own health for granted.
And then came tests.
And then came unexpected news.

And perhaps you had to go through difficult treatment, or major surgery.
And you did not know how it would go.
And during the recovery, you did not know how the recovery would go.

And it was long.
And it was hard.
And your family prayed for you.
And your church family prayed for you.
You wondered and you worried...is my health, my life going to be lost to

me?

And through the care of good doctors and nurses, you recovered.
And you're here.
And when you stop and think about what happened...what's the feeling?

We're not talking surface gratitude anymore, are we?
The feeling is...

You got your life back.

This is, I think, what's going on in our text.

Not surface gratitude.
Not even the daily discipline of gratitude.

It's life-changing gratitude...and it comes not through our efforts, but as a gift given to us...a gift we could not give ourselves.

I mean, I think I get the other nine not returning.

They're so excited, they're so overcome, they have to show their friends.

They have to get back to their families.

I don't picture them UNGRATEFUL to Jesus.

I just picture them so overcome with what has happened to them that they want to get back to their people just as quickly as they can.

And so they forget to say thank you.

Have you ever forgotten to say thank you?

Sometimes, it's not because we're so excited.

Sometimes, we're just distracted.

I recall the day that I was sitting in my doctor's office, and my doctor was late.

I mean, REALLY late.

I'm in the examination room, and I've been there for over an hour, waiting for my the doctor because I know I have a sinus infection, and I just need the antibiotics to clear up this sinus infection...and I've got a busy day ahead of me.

And I'm already adjusting my schedule in my head as I wait...and I wait...and finally, my doctor comes in, and he's very apologetic.

And he spends two minutes examining me.

And he agrees: sinus infection.

He sends the prescription to the pharmacy.

And he leaves.

And I leave.

The visit takes 2 minutes. The waiting took over an hour.

And I'm thinking to myself, gosh, now I've got to juggle this and move that and all because the doctor was running late...you know what I did not do in the examination room that day?

I did not tell my doctor thank you.

I mean, I liked my doctor.

And it's not like I have the knowledge that he has.

And it's not as though I can write myself a script for antibiotics.

You would think, wouldn't you...that any time I go see a competent, skilled doctor to help me get rid of a sinus infection...I would be grateful to have that kind of care.

Why did I forget, that day, to say thank you?
That day, I forgot because I was too busy.
I was distracted by the small picture.

Have you ever been distracted by the small picture?

- Maybe at the Thanksgiving dinner table this week, maybe someone will...I don't know, get under your skin. Have you ever had someone get under your skin at the holidays? And you'll want to respond with a zinger. May I suggest that before you respond with that zinger...may I suggest that you remember the big picture?

What's the big picture?
You know the big picture.

Knowing that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord—that's the big picture. Knowing that you have a family right here at Westminster—whether you've been a member for 57 years or a member for 7 days...knowing that you have a family here that will stand by you and support you and do whatever it takes to see you through life's ups and downs...

That's the big picture.

Bob and Mary were devoted members of their church.
It was a smaller church, there wasn't a lot of money for staff.
They had a pastor, they had a secretary.

So Bob cut the grass and helped keep the property of the church looking nice.

Mary helped with the kids—she had been doing it for so many years, some of the first kids that she watched in the nursery now had kids of their own.

One day, Mary died very suddenly.
It was a heart attack...she just collapsed after breakfast one morning.

And understandably, Bob really struggled with Mary's death.
He tried to come back to church, tried—in the weeks following the funeral—to go to worship...but after a few weeks of trying, he realized he just couldn't do it.

His friends at the church—they wanted to help.
But they also wanted to respect his privacy.

They sent him cards, and would occasionally drop by with dinner.

He welcomed the visits, but whenever the topic of church came up, he told his friends, "I just can't do it."

Finally, on Easter Sunday...Bob decided he would try one more time.

He came to worship, but when the congregation started to sing "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today"...he could NOT sing.

And when it came time to pray the prayers, he couldn't pray.

He began to feel more and more embarrassed that he wasn't participating, and that all the people seated close to him might see the tears in his eyes, that he was struggling, and he began to feel like maybe he should leave the service, but that would just be even MORE noticeable.

He was FROZEN.
He could not lift his body.
He could not lift his soul.

After worship was over, he tried to leave quickly, but it was Easter.

There were too many people greeting him to leave quickly.

And Bob felt awkward...

And his friends—they could see Bob was struggling.

Of course, they were ALSO so glad he was there.

So two of Bob's friends—they saw how embarrassed he looked during the social hour after worship, so they kind of pulled him aside, and led him through the masses to the door.

But before they let him go, they said to him:

“Bob, you come here on whatever terms you want.”

“If you can't sing, we will sing for you.

If you can't pray, we will pray for you.

If you can't give thanks, we will give thanks for you.

If you can't believe, we will believe for you.”

A few years later, Bob told this story to someone in the congregation who was facing similar circumstances.

“I don't know what I would have done without this church” said Bob.

“This church gave me my life back...”⁵

Friends, that's the big picture.

In Jesus Christ, God has given all of us our lives back.

I hope you remember the big picture when you bring your pledge card forward today.

But it's not just today that's on my mind.

I hope you remember the big picture every day.

And then share your gratitude in the most faithful, hopeful,

⁵ I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for sharing this story with me.

loving ways you know how.

Amen.