

Mitchells Presbyterian Church
April 25, 2021
4th Sunday of Easter/Earth Day

Prayer for Illumination:

God of the Word, open our hearts and minds, and give us the courage to hear your Word as we read the words of Scripture today. By the power of your Spirit, illuminate our paths. Amen.

Scriptures: Genesis 1:26-31a & Luke 17:11-19

Sermon: *"Gratitude"*

"Let the words of my mouth . . . "

The other evening we were queuing up a show on Hulu when I noticed in the *"recommended for you"* area a pop-up for the movie *"Bruce Almighty"* with Jim Carrey. Some of you might have seen this (hands up).

Carrey plays a television reporter named *"Bruce"* who despite all the positive and wonderful things happening in his life, is solely focused on the negative. In his mind, nothing is going right. So, at the end of what he calls *"the worst day of his life"*, he starts raging against God and God responds.

Played by Morgan Freeman, God endows Bruce with divine powers and then challenges him to see if he can do any better with running the universe.

There are some hilarious scenes as you would imagine from Jim Carrey, but in the end the movie delivers a serious message. It's all about *"not seeing your blessings"*. In other words, not seeing what is right in front of you.

In today's passage from Luke, Jesus is on a road trip, moving between Samaria and Galilee on his way to Jerusalem. As he enters a village, ten lepers approach him and call out from a distance, raising their voices in unison, *"Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"*

Now whether it was actual leprosy as we know it today or just some terrible skin disease that had afflicted them, we don't know but what we do know is that all ten of these individuals and many others like them would have been living in separate communities, set apart from "regular" society.

They would have been ostracized from family and friends. They would have relied solely on the generosity of others for everything. Their skin disease was not just the beginning of a slow physical death but it was a slow and tortuous emotional and spiritual death as well. They were the "unclean"; the "undesirables"; the "unwanted".

Well Jesus hears their cry and gives them a rather unusual command: "Go and show yourselves to the priests". So, they went. Seems strange to our ears that Jesus would have sent them to the priests but we must remember that the priests of that time wore a lot of hats or "collars" if you will 😊.

They were not just in charge of the synagogues or temple. They would have functioned a bit like a nurse practitioner. Per the law of Moses, they would examine these ten and determine if anything had changed with their condition. If it did, then they would be welcomed back into community.

And change it did. As our Gospel reading tells us; *and as they went, there were made clean!* All ten were healed. Ten who no doubt were surprised at this discovery. Perhaps some were overjoyed. Perhaps some celebrated. Perhaps others ran to tell their family and friends.

Who knows? What we do know is that one not only felt thankful BUT decided to actually give voice to that emotion, to express gratitude to God and to Jesus for their healing.

And that is important for us to hear. That gratitude or thankfulness is not only a response to something good, but also a choice that we make.

Think about it. Gratitude is not the only emotion we might choose to express in response to the events of any given day. Yes, there are reasons for gratitude, but there are also reasons for fear, for anger, for frustration, for grief.

Yet, we choose how much time to grant each of these emotions. We can choose. And what we choose seems important.

Google gratitude and your search engine will deliver to you more studies than you can imagine on the benefits of gratitude. Several I looked at noted that those who began keeping a gratitude journal were measurably happier, healthier, had lower blood pressure, slept better, and were more resilient.

One study even reported that expressing gratitude can make our memories happier. It says, *“Experiencing gratitude in the present makes us more likely to remember positive memories and actually transforms some of our neutral or even negative memories into positive ones.”*

Now I cannot vouch for the validity of any of these studies but I do know that something inside me seems to change the more I choose to practice gratitude.

One of my colleagues once said, *“Gratitude draws us out of ourselves into something larger, bigger, and grander than we could imagine and joins us to the font of blessing itself.”*

So how are we practicing gratitude today? Are we practicing thankfulness?

We have been through some challenging times this past year, and it’s easy to focus on the negative; what we have lost or what we can’t do anymore. Focusing on what we can do, even if it is a small thing, is a step towards gratitude.

After filming *“Bruce Almighty”*, Carrey was quoted as saying, *“I would challenge anybody in their darkest moment to write what they’re grateful for, even stupid little things like the green grass that made them feel good, the friendly conversation they had with somebody on an elevator. (in doing so) You start to realize how rich you are.”*

Our Psalmist seemed to get this. So many of our psalms, even those that start out as laments, finish with thanksgiving or gratitude. For instance, Psalm 138, *“I will give thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise”*.

Or Psalm 118, *“O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever”*. Or Psalm 9, *“I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds.”*

One of those wonderful deeds the Psalmist is speaking of is this amazing planet that God has created. And as we heard in our first reading today, WE, that's you and me, have been placed as the overseer of all that has been created.

Obviously, the psalmist had no idea that the resources on this planet would be limited. There were no hillside discussions in their time about carbon emissions, the cutting down of our forests, the polluting of our oceans and waterways or the science behind climate change.

However, what the Psalmist did know was that in making US in the image of God AND in giving us the gift of stewardship, we were being given the important job of managing these resources as God would manage them.

So, as the hands and feet of God, another way that we can show our gratitude is in doing those things, both the big and the small, that are good for our planet.

We can reduce, reuse, and recycle; we can plant gardens; we can be mindful about our use of plastics; and we can support and get involved with various conservation efforts, just to name a few.

We have a lot to be thankful for. Gratitude for those blessings in our life; gratitude for this amazing planet; and gratitude for each other. Hear these words from Paul to the church at Philippi as my words for you today:

"I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." (Phil 1:1-6).

I am so grateful that I had the opportunity to get to know you all and to feel the love and hospitality that is Mitchell's! It was a real blessing to get that call from Steve back in the fall of 2019, to fill in for a couple Sundays. Had we known what 2020 was going to bring, we all might have run the other way. Ha.

But I am grateful for the resilience that you have shown and for all the people who helped in so many ways, not only in making sure that we could get these services out every Sunday, but who made sure that all the needs of the congregation were being taken care of.

It's been an amazing testimony of God's love and of how much you all are a family and I am grateful to have been a part of it.

In closing, the nine lepers in our story today who went on their way to the priest did nothing wrong. In fact, they were just following the instructions that Jesus had given them. And they were healed.

But the one who returned voiced thanksgiving for their blessing and in doing so, received another blessing in return.

Remember, practicing gratitude is not a command but rather an invitation into something bigger that we all do together. So we have a choice. And if possible, choose gratitude.

Because this story of the lepers reminds us that no matter what has happened in our life, God has brought us back into community and we are reminded that we are ALL children of God. And for that, I am extremely grateful!

Thanks be to God!

Let us pray: God, may we be doers of your word and not just hearers. May we join our voices with all of creation in singing praises of gratitude and thanksgiving for all that you have done for us. Amen.

*Hymn of Dedication: #540 "God Be with You till We Meet Again"

