

October 13, 2019
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 23
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7
Psalm 66:1-11
2 Timothy 2:8-15
Luke 17:11-19

First, a reminder: it's impossible to know whether the ten people in the story we just heard actually had leprosy as we understand it. At that time, the term *leprosy* wasn't specific to the bacterial infection now called Hansen's Disease. Rather, it was a catchall term for any skin condition that caused changes in the physical appearance of the affected area of the skin. It was the admixture of skin affected and unaffected that made its bearer "unclean." Anyone touching someone unclean would also become unclean, at least temporarily, so people with "leprosy" were required to maintain physical distance from others. Therefore, even persons free from debilitating health problems would suffer debilitating isolation and poverty. Their sentence lasted until the condition resolved and a priest certified it as such—potentially, it lasted forever.

In today's Gospel, ten people with leprosy—or some sort of skin condition—ask Jesus for mercy. In response, Jesus sends them to the priests, and they are healed as they go. Realizing what has happened, nine keep going, but the unlikeliest one among them turns back, to praise God and thank Jesus. To that one, Jesus says, "Your faith has made you well."

This story contains all three of what writer Ann Lamott calls "the three *essential* prayers": *help*, *thanks*, and *wow*. All ten of those people with leprosy voiced *help*, but only one added *wow* and then *thanks*. All ten were healed, but only that one became truly well.

I want to highlight a couple of things. First, the proportion of one in ten seems about right to me, even when I think about my own frequency of turning. We humans tend to trundle on our way, acutely aware of shortfall and blind to abundance. Maybe our Gospel lesson is an indication that it has long been that way. But the pressures of our consumption-driven capitalistic culture certainly don't help, and the competition only seems to be getting fiercer.

Second, this story directly links gratitude and wellness. Gratitude is an orientation to appreciation that includes both thanks and wow. Gratitude has actually been much in the media recently. Googling the terms "gratitude journal" and "Downton Abbey" yielded about the same number of results. When the gratitude chatter ramped up, it felt to me like the latest me-oriented self-help fad of the day. At least, that's the excuse I used to mostly ignore it. But, fad aside, the Christian tradition has long had things to say about gratitude. In fact, most religious traditions—perhaps most cultures—have long had things to say about gratitude. For example, the practice of saying grace, or some sort of special recognition of mealtime, is a practice both universal and ancient.

You've probably heard of Brené Brown. Her books are quite popular, but I was slow joining the bandwagon, again figuring that she was another fad of the day. I've now told you something about me, by the way. But then I learned that Brené Brown is a PhD-holding researcher and professor, *and* a practicing Episcopalian. That's the part I really needed to know, I guess. She's known primarily for her work on shame and the interplay of vulnerability and courage. That's the subject of her recent Netflix special. Brown has also done work on gratitude and wellness. In one interview, she says this: "... the relationship between joy and gratitude was one of the most important things I found in the research. I wasn't expecting it. But ... in 12 years of research and 11,000 pieces of data, I did not interview in all that time a person who would describe themselves as joyful, or describe their lives joyous, who did not *actively practice* gratitude (emphasis mine)."¹ By "actively practice," she means such simple things as saying grace at meals or keeping one of those faddish gratitude journals.

Diana Butler Bass is church historian who has written several books about the shifts underway for mainline Protestantism. Her most recent offering is titled *Grateful: The Subversive Practice of Giving Thanks*. She says this: "Gratitude is an emotion. Gratitude is an ethical way of life. It is a disposition, an awareness, a set of habits. But ultimately, gratitude is a place—perhaps *the* place—where we find our truest and best selves. To know the mystery of life is to be grateful in all things. *In* all things, *with* all things, *through* all things."² Importantly, she discusses in both the personal and the public; she talks about living as a grateful individual, *and* she explores the idea of building a grateful society. As I understand it, this recognizes that personal wellbeing extends into the common good.

I'd already been pondering adding more intentional practice of gratitude into my days, and this sermon preparation has convinced me it's time. I strongly encourage you to do the same. Fortunately, none of us is starting from scratch. As a community, we already share at least one gratitude practice: communion. Remember, Holy Eucharist is also called the Great Thanksgiving. Making a comparison to Ann Lamott's triad of *help*, *thanks*, and *wow*, you'll note every Eucharistic prayer includes a little *help*, a lot of *wow*, and an even larger serving of *thanks*. The Rite II prayers from *The Book of Common Prayer* always begin with this sentence: It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth."³ That is followed by a brief description of what it is we give thanks for, with a seasonal emphasis.

The Eucharistic prayer is a bit like saying grace over a meal at home: before we tuck in, we pause, first for mindful remembrance, and then for voiced thanks. It becomes a dialogue with God, through which we are made well and find joy. I think that's what God wants for us, we creatures in whom God delights. It's about us as individuals, but it's not just about that. After the meal, at the end of our worship, we beings of gratitude-induced wellbeing are sent to carry joy into the world. For Christians, in the meal at home and the meal here, there's always a next step. This reminds me of one Latin American mealtime blessing: "To those who have hunger, give bread. And to those who have bread, give the hunger for justice."

All that being said, today's sermon is supposed to be about *stewardship*. We're about to kick off our annual stewardship campaign. We're actually trying to move away from a big annual campaign and toward a more year-round model. So this year we'll have a scaled-down fall campaign with more to come throughout the coming year.

In case you're new to the Episcopal Church, this is a good time to note a few key points, First, "stewardship" means giving to the church of one's time, talent, and treasure, though the annual campaign tends to focus on the treasure part of the formula. Second, every congregation of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut is required to be self-sustaining. We get no funding from the Diocese, but rather must tithe 10% of our budget to help fund Diocesan operations.

In case you're new to *this* church, you also need to know that this congregation gets more than half of what it needs from endowment funds, and for years we have been spending down the principle on those funds. Our church's already tough financial situation got worse when another handful of people left the congregation after I was called as rector. I just need to put that out there. We will need to decide what to do about it.

This church has unique demographics that make stewardship here challenging. There are two key factors, I think. One, we lack the large cohort of older retired people who have more available time, talent and treasure to offer. And two, this congregation has historically had very high turnover, largely because we are in a college town and a lot of people here are associated with colleges. Let me be clear: overall, these factors aren't by definition *liabilities*. Rather, for us they're *assets*. Unlike other churches, we are unbound. Now it's true that we're still learning not only to *accommodate* but also to *leverage* our uniqueness. I think the things that we need to do are part of what other churches are going to be doing ten years down the line. We are forging a new path for everyone else. All of that is part of the ongoing stewardship task before us. We need to talk about our financial situation. And we need to be honest about what it will take to deal with it. But the point is to increase knowledge and understanding, and not to induce guilt or fear.

Over the next several weeks, your leadership will ask you to consider or reconsider your commitment of time, talent, and treasure to this church. Moving past the facts, stewardship is really about recognizing God's abundance in *your* life, and then returning a portion from that abundance. It *is* the turning to God in gratitude, a spiritual practice that does lead to wellbeing and joy. Please, think about and pray about *your* place in this community, about how it is part of your spiritual life, and especially about how it relates to your practice of gratitude.

Notes

¹ Brené Brown in "Brené Brown on the relationship between joy and gratitude," a video by the University of Minnesota Center for Spirituality and Healing, Posted on YouTube on November 28 2012, available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2IjSHUc7TXM> (accessed October 13, 2019).

² Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful: The Subversive Practice of Giving Thanks* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018), 194.

³ *The 1979 Book of Common Prayer*, 361.