

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, October 9, 2016)

Text: Luke 17:11-19 (New Revised Standard Version)

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

Reflections by Pastor Donald: "A Life of Gratitude"

Merci! Danke Schon! Maraming salamat! Obrigado! So many ways to say thank you, as we sang in our song, "Malo! Malo! Thanks Be to God" last week. And even though I stumbled over many of the pronunciations, as I imagine some of you did as well, it brought joy to my heart and your faces as we sang "thank you" in French, German, Tagalog, Portugese and many other tongues. For anytime we say thank you, no matter what language we're using, a spirit of joy and gratitude is brought forward in our hearts and in our minds. Oh, unless you're speaking teenager that is, (sarcastically) "Thanks, Mom!" Not so much kindness and warmth in that particular iteration, is there?

But when our gratitude is sincere and our appreciation authentic, something changes in us and in the person we're thanking. Try it. Just turn to the person beside you, behind you or in front of you and say "thank you for being here!" Were you able to do it without smiling or getting one in return? I doubt it. And if you did, you might need to try it again.

Wouldn't it be amazing to have that feeling again and again throughout your day and throughout your whole life? It's actually possible when we live a life of gratitude or, as our former Pastor Art loves to say, go through our lives with an attitude of gratitude. Approaching all of life with thanks, no matter what the circumstance can actually change our circumstances and the way we feel about them. Thanking God for our challenges as well as our blessings can turn the tide on how we move through this life. Thanking others for not only what they do for us but for who they are as God's child can enable us to literally lift their spirits as well as ours. And when that happens, burdens are lifted, solutions are found and the God we thank shows us how many blessings are abounding in our lives no matter what things may look like through our earthly eyes.

"Gratitude is indeed a response to the blessings of life, but it is also a choice to see those blessings, name them, and express our gratitude in word and deed," Dr. David Lose wrote in his essay "Gratitude and Grace" this week. "And giving voice to gratitude is a choice with consequences, for as we express our gratitude, we affect those around us, even shape the reality in which we live."

We have many ways we can affect others and what's happening in the world around us through our response to them. For some of us it's with fear, for others it's with negativity for some it's with anger and still others it's with frustration. And what do you think we get back when we respond in those ways. Usually the same thing we're putting out. As Newton's Third Law would remind us, "for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." And although Scott would probably be the first

to point out that this law is more about a pair of forces acting on two interacting objects, I think he'll allow me this poetic license since it does often prove true that when we're expressing anger to someone else, they are likely to respond in anger. Likewise, if we're moving through life with an attitude of "everybody is out to get me" – they probably will.

But what would happen if we lived our lives in as consciously and conscientiously a state of thankfulness as possible? Giving thanks for that person or situation we're afraid of may just help us to see that our fear is groundless and remind us that God is with us to walk through whatever we're facing and be with whoever we're facing as well.

"...that's what's key: we are making choices," Dr. Lose writes. "We may feel a range of emotions to all kinds of circumstances and situations, but we choose which to give expression. When confronted by someone who is angry, do we respond with anger as a form of self-protection or do we choose empathy, trying to understand the emotions of the other, and gratitude that the person was willing to be honest? When we are set back in some endeavor at school or work, do we express frustration or a resolve to keep at it and gratitude for what we've learned through this setback? These are choices."

In today's story from the Gospel according to Luke – the only place this story is told in the scriptures, by the way, we notice how challenging it is to live a life of gratitude – especially when we're beset by many challenges and have, perhaps, not been used to giving thanks for anything in our lives. Here in Jesus' encounter with the ten people beset by leprosy, we note with sorrow the sad state of people considered so unclean and untouchable that they live as outcasts from their society. As we learned at our LEAP of Faith Bible study on Wednesday night, in Jesus's time people with skin diseases (often collectively referred to as "leprosy") had to keep their distance from other people, and live in separate colonies and often gather near busy roadways to ask for charity. It occurred to me that, in some ways, poverty and homelessness have become the leprosy of our day as we see people in our society camped out on the streets in isolated tent cities and begging at the entrance and exit ramps of our many southern California freeways. How difficult and challenging must it be to live a life of gratitude in such circumstances and be treated with such indifference or animosity from others.

But this is always where Jesus comes into the picture. Hearing the cries of those calling for mercy, Jesus does what others do not, he SEES them. His ability to live every moment in a state of gratitude allows him to be aware of all that are in his environment and to reach out with mercy and grace to heal them.

But even as they are healed on the way to the priests as he instructed them, only one of the ten, a Samaritan at that, thinks to turn around and fall down in a full attitude of gratitude at Jesus's feet, thanking him and praising God for his healing and, most likely, for the healing of all those who have gone on without him.

Being a Samaritan made this particular person a double outcast in the society Jesus lived in for although they were part of Judaism they did not center their faith in Jerusalem or the temple, resulting in, as religious differences often do, a long-standing resentment between the Samaritans and the Jews. Yet another reason for Jesus to come along, for in healing this man he not only breaks down the societal barrier between the well and the ill but, as a Jew, he breaks down the religious barrier between those who have resented each other for a very long time. In this healing the gratitude trumps the resentment and a rift is repaired that may easily lead to change in the hearts of others as they hear about it and become thankful for Jesus themselves.

What does it take for US to be reminded to be thankful? How much do we have to come out of ourselves, let go of our preconceived notions and old resentments so that we can be attuned to what God is doing in this world for us and for those around us? Is it perhaps as simple as beginning each day by thanking God for another day and for whatever has come and will come our way?

The great writer Anne Lamont has famously said that there are only three essential prayers, "Help, Thanks and Wow!" and she even wrote a book about those prayers with the same title.

"Gratitude begins in our hearts and then dovetails into behavior," she writes there. "It almost always makes you willing to be of service, which is where the joy resides. It means that you are willing to stop being such a jerk. When you are aware of all that has been given to you, in your lifetime and the past few days, it is hard not to be humbled, and pleased to give back." That's an attitude of gratitude if I ever heard of one.

"Gratitude, like all of our other options, becomes easier to choose as we practice it," Dr. Lose writes. "Gratitude, like faith and hope and love and commitment, are not inborn traits that some have and others don't, but rather gratitude is more like a muscle that can be strengthened over time. And as you practice giving thanks and more frequently share your gratitude, you not only grow in gratitude but create an example for others. More than that, you create a climate in which it is easier to be grateful and encourage those around you to see the blessings all around us."

Let me leave you today with some verses from Ted Loder's beautiful book, "Guerrillas of Grace" and his poem, "Thank You for Each Moment."

Lord, thank you for each moment,
for the blue-sky moment,
the softening earth, the freshening wind,
for the sap flowing,
the bird nesting, the yellow bush,
for my full heart
and the joy rising in me.

Soften me
to receive whatever comes as a gift
and to praise you in it...

Lord, thank you for each moment,
for the midnight moment,
the loneliness, the fretful wondering,
for the watchful stars,
the long ache, the sleepless wait,
for my restless heart
and the hope straining in me.

Focus me
to see whatever comes as a gift
and to praise you in it.

Lord, thank you for each moment,
for the shared moment,
the listening, the unguarded word,
for the fragile openness,
the ready smile, the accepted difference,
for my passionate heart
and the trust rooting in me,

Stretch me
to grow with whatever comes as a gift
and to praise you in it.

Amen.