

October 13 2013

Scripture Lessons ~ II Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c

Luke 17:11-19

Sermon – *An Attitude of Gratitude*

While thankfulness is certainly not a natural trait, the more the sociologists and physiologists study human behavior the more clear it becomes that what scripture teaches about and often time self-centered nature of human beings is to use a modern day phrase, pretty much telling it like it is. People don't automatically thank each other nor God for anything. And so how in the world do we as followers of Jesus, become the thankful people that God calls us to be.

Or to say it in different words, how do we adopt an attitude of gratitude about the way that we live our lives? Course some minor thankfulness is conditioned into us at an early age as children, we all know that because our parents always admonished us to always say please and thank-you for the things that we wanted and for the things that we received. And we gradually learned that if we say thank you when someone gives us something or we give something back in return, the chances are greatly increased that person is going to give us something more in the future. That is why I always return the containers that you give food to me in, because that is my way of saying thank you and maybe you will fill it up again. I learned that a long time ago.

But you know those kind of shallow socially polite expressions of gratitude are not always reflective of what I would call an inner quality of an attitude of gratitude. In fact saying thank you is a great beginning but it can also be more self-serving than anything else. If I say thank you, then I will be light and I will get more given to me. Isn't that all what that kind of conditioning really shows to us, that if it isn't from the heart then the thank you doesn't really mean anything at all.

When Jesus healed those 10 lepers, in Luke 17, I frankly suspect he wasn't surprised by the lack of any expression of gratitude on their part of the 9 that were left at all. Jesus knew human nature through and through and so the question, where are those other nine was basically sort of rhetorical in nature, but that tenth man, the one that fell at Jesus feet and praised God and thanked Jesus was pretty much different. Somehow he had developed a genuinely joyful attitude of thankfulness, so much so that he shouted his

praise of thanksgiving. How I wonder did this one man develop a genuine attitude of thankfulness in his life.

I think a key to understanding this man's difference in attitude from that of the other nine that were healed was his ethnicity which Jesus makes a pretty big point of underscoring. Jesus was at that time, traveling through border country between Jewish and Gentile land and this group of lepers was reflective of the mixed backgrounds of the lepers of that region. The man who returned to thank Jesus was a Samaritan and although the text does not specifically state, I believe the implication is quite clear the other 9 or the ungrateful were like Jesus, all fellow Jews. And so why is that significant?

Well the Jewish people in Jesus time understood themselves to be God's special chosen people. Whatever blessings they received, they naturally felt they deserved. Because they were decedents of the great Abraham and we know from scripture that was one of God's favorites. And what are the nine Jewish lepers? They were outcasts, they were the dregs of any society in the ancient world. But the attitude of being just a little bit better and deserving of God's blessings was something that had been conditioned into them long, long before they became lepers. And so when they were healed by Jesus, they felt kind of a matter of God making right which had previously been made wrong.

God was only restoring to them what was their true birthright, what they really deserved in life. There was no reason then to praise God, no reason then to praise Jesus, in their minds they were receiving back what they had deserved all along in life. Now further, they had been restored to health, and they could no longer associate with the likes of a Samaritan. While they were lepers, the Samaritan and the Jewish people were equal, but that was not the case anymore. If the Samaritan wanted to turn around and thank Jesus that was all well and good, but they were done being anywhere near that Samaritan and so they were gone from the scene.

And the Samaritan, and by the way we all have a great connotation of a Samaritan maybe because we think of a Samaritan as someone who does a great thing for someone else. But this Samaritan on the other hand, was somebody who had grown up with no standing in society in that area of the world at all. He was a man of mixed race, he was a so called half-breed looked down upon by both Jews and Gentiles alike. The Samaritans in that day were a marginalized people, they fitted somewhere between the cracks of life. This man had never known any kind of status at all in his life, and then leprosy had struck the worst disease known to humanity at that time in history. And he

had been tossed to the bottom of any society that there was, he was a non-person virtually reduced to an animal existence.

So the Samaritan knew of himself to be undeserving of anything in life. He had no illusions about his relationships with God or his fellow human beings, and yet his plea of desperation had been answered by Jesus. He had cried out in mercy and his request had been granted. And when he saw he had been healed he was amazed, he was astonished, and he was grateful, totally grateful to God for what had been done.

You know that many times that we as Christian brothers and sisters can also have a kind of superior attitude in regard to the way we treat others as well. We sometimes act like we are God's chosen people in the sense that we are also deserving of the blessings that God gives to all of God's children all around us. And so how do we develop a genuine attitude of gratitude in our lives? The Samaritan leper is surprisingly a sign post for each one of us as Christians. It is only when we like him, recognize our own lack of distinction, our own lack of status, our own lack of deservedness of whatever there is in life that we think we deserve, that we truly understand that in God's sight, we are gifted, we are chosen, because we really are.

To use more traditionally Christian language, it is only when we acknowledge the imperfections of our own life that we can understand the riches of God's grace to us, God's mercy to us day by day in everything that we do, then we are amazed, then we are astonished and very, very grateful to God for everything that comes into our lives. But unfortunately frequent experience with this feeling of being chosen can produce an attitude like unto what I believe the nine ungrateful lepers in Jesus' parable had.

Instead of being amazed, astonished and grateful for gifts that we receive from God and from the good earth, and from our other human beings we simply say to ourselves "I deserve it, I deserve it, I work hard in this world, and I deserve it". An attitude of gratitude is not really a very natural thing at all for human beings. It is not fostered by the society of which we live. And just as in Jesus day, nine out of ten people around us probably don't have an attitude of gratitude, but for those that do, what a fresh, what a wonderful and pleasing attitude can be. Your other human beings will be downright surprised by it, and especially to God. God, who is the ultimate source of everything that we experience in life.

And together we say, Amen.

