

THANKFULNESS



Luke 17:15 "Then one of (the ten lepers on the road to Jerusalem), when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him."

We teach it to our children from the very start, as soon as they can speak. Say "Thank you," we insist. "What do you say," we prompt them when they forget. Say "Thank you." And indeed, I am proud these days when others tell me how polite my adult children are. I feel that we taught them well.

But wait a minute. That's not what I really wanted for my children. I didn't want my children to be polite, so much as to be thankful. I wanted my children to grow up and realize how blessed their lives have been, how lucky they were to be born in this country, to have parents that loved them. I wanted my children to understand that unlike some many in the world, they never missed a meal, always had a roof over their heads, benefited from a decent education, and enjoyed growing up in a community of loving and supportive friends. I don't want my children to simply be polite. I want my children to be thankful.

I want my children to be like the one leper in today's Gospel story who cries out praising God in a loud voice for what they all have received in this healing, and not to be like the other nine lepers who politely go on their way. I want my children to be like the one leper in today's Gospel story who turns his life around, who changes direction, who returns to Jesus, and falls down at his feet in gratitude. I don't just want my children to be 'polite', I want them to be grateful. I want them to be people who feel blessed, people who actually live real lives of thankfulness, sharing and caring for others, others less fortunate than themselves, but sadly at times I fear that my children are really more like the other nine who wander off.

How about you? Don't we want the same for all our children? Indeed, don't we want the same for ourselves? Don't we want to be *those people*, those people who understand how blessed our lives, how lucky we are, and to respond to our good fortune with gratitude and generosity --- Are we in the end just 'polite' Christians --- or are we the thankful children of God, living lives of real appreciation and thankfulness?

I also don't want to just feel 'thankful,' this isn't about just 'feelings' for me. I want us to live out that thankfulness. I want the very actions of our lives to bear witness to how grateful we are for the life we have. That's why I am a Christian. That's why I go to church each week, to thank God for the blessings of my life. That's why I chose the profession I did. I want my life to reflect the love and gratitude that I have toward God, and to be an expression of my own thankfulness. I want to take the gifts and talents and opportunities that God has so graciously bestowed upon me, and for which I am so deeply thankful, and do something important with them. I don't want to just be a polite Christian. I want us to be a responsible and committed disciples of Jesus, who recognize how blessed we are, and who then *do* something about it, who respond with thankfulness and generosity.

I am not talking about some dramatic sacrificial act on our part. I am talking about living lives of simple gratitude. All

that is required of us is to be like the tenth leper in today's Gospel story, to recognize the good fortune we have received in life and to respond to it. In a world where 1 in 5 people on the earth live lives of extreme poverty, earning less than \$3.00 a day, we are all of us blessed. All that is required is for us to do is to stop for a moment and consider that, like the one leper did. And then to turn around and return our thanks to God, and not politely go on our way like the other nine.

A life of simple gratitude requires that we not take personal credit for our good fortune, that we not claim self-healing, but instead thank God for the many good things we have received in life, most of which are not of our own doing, like when, where, and to whom we were born, for instance, perhaps the most important factors in our lives. We didn't choose those things. We are not self-made men and women. We are instead inheritors of the good life.

God has been so generous to us. Some people see that, some people see what God has done in their lives and in our world, and are transformed by it, becoming grateful and generous people in their own ways. That's what I want for my children, and for myself, and for us! But other people, other people hoard the benefits they have received. Others deny God the glory, and puff themselves up, and refuse kindness, mercy, and recognition to others, as though they got theirs and do not care about the

others around them. There are some people who quite literally don't see the others struggling to survive in our world, who don't see Lazarus at our gate, who turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to the needs of poor around us, who think they earned their own good fortune, and so these others must deserve what they got or don't have, and so ignore the "little people" who are occasionally useful but mostly just get in the way of our lives.

Actually seeing the misfortunate of others around us would shatter that self-image, as having blessed lives solely because of our own personal merit, as though we deserved it. But the healed tenth leper who returned to give thanks was saying two things: I didn't do this for myself, and I need to thank the source of my healing and good fortune, and let Jesus know that I am grateful. I for one see too many of the smug in our world who believe themselves self-sufficient, self-made, and therefore entitled to be self-serving. In such a world as that, it is no wonder, that like my children, the majority of Americans give virtually nothing back to God, or to the Church, or even to charity. In such a world, it is no wonder that the majority of Americans do not live lives of simple gratitude, but instead live in fear, fear of not having enough, or fear of losing what they have, fear even of having to share their good fortune with others, with 'those people.' In such a world, it is no wonder, according to a recent study, that half of all the active members

of Christian churches give virtually nothing at all to support those congregations they attend. They are attending church for themselves, not to worship God --- They are attending church in case they need assistance, not in order to give assistance to others.

Indeed, while the majority of Americans don't want to give God any credit for the blessings we enjoy, we are often so quick to blame an unfair God for any hardships we must endure. This refusal to live lives of true gratitude is, in my opinion, the spiritual crisis of our day. Not feeling that gratitude leaves us in a bleak and barren God-forsaken place. It explains the greedy 1%, who just want more and more, and who don't know the meaning of enough. It explains the anger tearing apart our political life between the haves and have-nots. It explains the stalemate in our government. It explains the well-advanced collapse of many churches and synagogues, and the alienation from God that is making modern life seem so unrewarding to so many.

This isn't about doctrine, or conversion strategies, or denominational pride. It's about simple gratitude. It's about seeing the hand of God at work in our lives, sometimes as dramatic as the healing of a leper, but most often much less so, and yet just as real.

In a sense, gratitude is the test of having any faith at all. The test of faith isn't attending church -- some of my most faithful friends won't get near a church. Nor is it declaring oneself to be a Christian -- especially as "Christian" has come too often to mean being cruel, arrogant, judgmental, and closed-minded.

The test of faith is seeing God at work in the world around us, and in our own lives, and responding in awe and gratitude. The test of faith is knowing that "goodness and mercy" do follow indeed us "all the days of our lives" as the Scriptures declare. It is about seeing God in the miracle of childbirth, in the graciousness of forgiveness, in the courage of self-sacrifice, in acts of justice and random kindness, and in the beauty and majesty of creation.

We give thanks to God, because we are grateful for God's presence in our lives. We recognize God's deep love for us, we see signs of God's gracious providence all around us; and we recognize that life itself is a gift, that God hasn't left us comfortless, but rather that God, without any initiative or merit on our part, has surrounded us with an overwhelming abundance, and we are blessed --- not just polite Christians, but *thankful* followers of Jesus, living lives of simple gratitude. Amen.