

grATTITUDE

Luke 17:11-19, The Message

I've heard that most church-goers eat the same thing for lunch after every Sunday morning service. Do you know what that is? Roast pastor! Well, a year ago today I told a story in the service that was re-told around the Blanchard Thanksgiving table. Jean's son-in-law, Michael Pontbriand who is a producer with Cogeco in Kingston, was so taken with it that he made a short mini drama out of it. In case you haven't seen it on cable, I'll replay it for you now.

(And for those of you were not present to see it, here is the story.)

VIDEO: An elderly man in Phoenix calls his son in New York and says, "I hate to ruin your day, but I have to tell you that your mother and I are divorcing; 45 years of misery is enough." "Pop, what are you talking about?" the son screams. "We can't stand the sight of each other any longer," the old man says. "We're sick of each other, and I'm sick of talking about this, so you call your sister in Chicago and tell her." Then he hangs up.

Frantic, the son calls his sister, who explodes on the phone. "Like heck they're getting divorced," she shouts, "I'll take care of this." She calls Phoenix immediately, and shouts at her father, "You are NOT getting divorced. Don't do a single thing until I get there. I'm calling my brother back, and we'll both be there tomorrow. Until then, don't do a thing, DO YOU HEAR ME?"

The old man hangs up his phone and turns to his wife. "Okay," he says, it's all arranged. The kids will be home for Thanksgiving."

I wonder how the kids felt when they discovered they'd been duped. I wonder how Mom and Dad felt when they realized that even though they got what they wanted that the kids were there under false pretences. I want to think that when they re-united as a family that the priorities of life became clearer, that the ski trip and the double shift would seem unimportant in comparison with family. I'm afraid, however, that may not have been the case.

Thanksgiving! Besides being a long weekend that focuses on food and family, food and friends, food and fun and games and walks in autumn leaves, returning for some left over food, it really is a secular feast (food!) with religious overtones - if we choose to hear them!

I was thinking about why Thanksgiving was such a special holiday in this era of entitlement. We're so caught up on what we think we deserve, our "rights", as I said last week our "me, myself, and I" focus that the deep seated gratitude so fundamental to a healthy life goes begging. The odds against bumping into a truly thankful person seem about the same as that day when Jesus healed 10 lepers, and only one came back to say "thank you."

In their defence, I know that these men had a lot going against them. They had probably gotten out of the habit of feeling gratitude, let alone expressing it. If you believe that life has you behind the eight ball, it takes a conscious effort to be thankful. They

were marginalized! Ostracized! Excluded! All ten of them! If you were inflicted with the scourge of leprosy back then, you were not welcome anywhere near healthy people. You watched life from a distance, because you were considered “unclean” – not just physically - but from a religious standpoint as well.

The people viewing them from a distance might have said, like the self-righteous man praying ostentatiously in the Temple: “I thank you, God, that I am not like those other people are ...” as he then proceeds to outline all his own positive characteristics.

You’ve heard about the person who complained he had no shoes until he met a person who had no feet? Well, what about the man who had no feet? Did he complain about no feet until he met a man that had no calves? Did that one complain until he met a man who had no legs at all? How far can we go in dismembering the body to prod us into thankfulness? We’re a society of complainers. Really! Seriously. Think about this:

What percentage of our day is spent either listening to complaint, or jumping into the fray with our own negativity. And when we do get around to getting over our self-centered complaining, it seems to be in comparison to what someone else has or is.

You’ve seen the pictures on TV that are part of the appeal for funds for The Christian Leprosy Mission. Not a pretty sight. Missing toes and fingers, and disfigured faces! I try to imagine how it would feel to be a leper – not just the physical handicap that is created by the disease, but also the emotional feeling of rejection and unworthiness to be a part of society.

I can’t bring myself to say, though, “Thank You God that I don’t have leprosy. That somehow puts them in a less-preferred category than me. The same as “Thank You God that I’m not battling cancer. I’m thankful for the health and strength I have, but when I’m tempted to complain about my poor aching joints, I can’t bring myself to bring comparisons in like “At least I’m not facing surgery.” Or, “Thank God I’m not like those people” whoever “those people are”. There seems to be a lot of the “those people” around!

Or, Thank You God that I’m not going through a divorce. Sometimes emotional pain is harder to bear than physical disability. Being shunted to the margins of life because you don’t fit the mainstream norm – for whatever reason – can really hurt. Many of us have been there, because we have become “those people” in others’ eyes, and the isolation that is created by prejudice can be palpable.

Out of the ten lepers, there was one who was even more of an outcast: the Samaritan. There was a great deal of ethnic prejudice between the Jews and the Samaritans back then, similar to any other prejudice, racial or otherwise, today. If you’ve ever found yourself around people who have an irrational dislike for another race, skin colour, religion, ethnic or social group – or perhaps found *yourself* to be the target of prejudicial slurs for any reason, all of which were beyond your control, you will know how that lone Samaritan felt. Exclusion upon exclusion! Rejection upon rejection.

Well, as always, when Jesus is present good news can come out of bad, a situation of desperation is transformed into hope, the excluded are included, and miracles of health spring from illness. And that’s exactly what happened.

Ten were healed. One came back and said “thank you.” I don’t understand what was going on in the other nine men’s minds. Every single one of the ten men had their lives changed, their health restored, and yet there was only one who expressed thanks, only one whose gratitude turned him around and brought him back and he was the Samaritan, at that. It was the “excluded of the excluded” that was kneeling at Jesus’ feet, saying ‘Thank You!’ Then, as Ann read to us, Jesus’ said:

“Were not ten healed? Where are the nine? Can none be found to come back and give glory to God except this outsider?”

Luke 17:17,18

Of course the Son of God side of Jesus knew the answer. God knows us inside out, knows we are “made of dust”ⁱ, understands the one in ten odds, knows that so many of us are so full of ourselves that we can’t stop long enough to acknowledge even this amazing gift, this new lease on life. Gratitude doesn’t spring from self-absorbed, independent people who believe they are entitled to everything they get, and more.

I've mentioned before that I have a member of my extended family who is a recovering alcoholic. We have become rather close in the last number of years, and I have received much insight into life through Andy, I will call him. Andy has been clean and sober for 21 years. Prior to twenty one years ago he'd tried and failed to hold on to a very responsible position in business, struggled with a shaky marriage and failed there too, as his disease interfered with health and every aspect of his life. And then the bottom fell out – on everything.

Today he is happily re-married, holds a very responsible position once again with a highly reputed organization, and life has taken on the dimensions that God intended for his life to have.

Some time ago, Andy sent an email to me with the following words of wisdom. If you've been in my office you will have seen them posted to my wall:

“Occasionally the “poor me’s set in. Gratitude in these circumstances is lacking, and is usually the antidote”

Is feeling sorry for ourselves the mark of a lack of gratitude? Is it the focus on our circumstances that brings out the “why me’s, poor me’s, and what have I done to deserve this” attitude to life? Is this something that could be *remedied* by thankfulness?

Andy goes on to say:

“I have never seen a grateful alcoholic relapse, and I think the same applies to the general population.”

Once again, something to ponder.

This time of year as the harvest rolls in, and we are surrounded by reminders of God’s bounty, it is easy to at least give lip service to our thankfulness. It’s not just the turkey and stuffing (food!) and autumn leaves and beautiful music and amazing decorations at church that makes us feel good at Thanksgiving. I believe, along with Andy, that when the ‘general population’ – that’s us - *intentionally* focuses on an attitude of gratitude, on being thankful – whether it’s to God, or family, or country, it impacts our mood. As we give our thanks our whole outlook on life shifts from the “me, myself and I” to the “Other”. That attitude is a choice we can make. I think that’s what makes Thanksgiving special. We *can* leave the group of complainers, the self-absorbed, the pity-party people, the poor me’s, the hard-done by’s behind and decide to turn around and come back and from our hearts say “Thank You, Thank You, Thank You!” Let’s say that together right now: “Thank You, Thank You, Thank You!” Amen!
