

Psalm 100 ~ Luke 17:11-19 (MSG)
Let All Things Now Living
 Thanksgiving Sunday ~ Sacrament of Baptism ~ November 26, 2023
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Introduction:

They had nothing to lose that day. Life couldn't get worse for them. And then the Rabbi, Jesus crossed their path. Could this be their lucky day? Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, By Luke 17, where today's story is found, he had been on that path already for eight chapters. Since Luke 9:51, when Luke tells us that Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem. That path has led him to this border crossing, literally, between Jesus' home territory (Galilee) and foreign, you might say hostile territory, during Jesus' time, (Samaria). This is also a narrative signal: throughout the Bible, a liminal space, is the setting where something strange and mystical is likely to occur. So here are these ten people afflicted by an incurable contagious skin disease, requiring them to live a marginal, isolated existence at a distance from all other people. The sun was high in the sky, maybe their eyes were playing tricks on them. But maybe not. Could this really be their lucky day? Might as well give it a shot!

As I read this story you have likely heard before, I have a word of challenge to us all. Look for yourself in this story, today. Brother David Steindl-Rast, O.S.B. has written, "Before biblical passages can help us, we must allow them to put us on the spot! I must tell myself: Stop and listen! This concerns *you!*... This means me! To face this fact calls for courage—the courage to accept myself, to accept myself as the person I am."ⁱ

Sermon:

I think grownups are better at hiding it than young children. But this particular affliction has taken hold of our whole culture, young and old, and in between. Your case may have flared up today, on this Sunday after Thanksgiving. Which is also the Sunday before December and before Advent/Christmas season officially begins. Not even a mask will protect you from this malady. Friends, I am talking about a spiritual bug.

Nine of the men in today's Gospel story who were healed of their leprosy by Jesus, were *still* plagued with it. What am I talking about? I'm talking about the "What's next?" disease. By that I mean, a propensity, if not driving compulsion to constantly be looking ahead to the next thing. Whether it's a constant need to be entertained, or a driving desire to be in complete control, or a guard against the fear of the unknown. If you find yourself asking "What's next" you are not alone. The "What's next" disease is endemic to our future-oriented culture. Most of us, no matter how good or bad things are going at the moment have a need to keep moving, keep looking ahead, to keep thinking, keep wondering, well, "What's next?"

Good news: I can offer you a cure here today, from the heart of our scriptures. And at the center of our story today in Luke 17 with Jesus and the ten men who were afflicted with leprosy. It is choosing to practice an attitude of gratitude. We can do this by taking a breath, taking a beat, just long enough to look back and be thankful. Sounds easy enough, but not for most of

us. You'd think looking back would turn us all into a pillar of salt! But that was Lot's wife back in Genesis 19 in the midst of an extreme and particular story of God's deliverance—*not* a life-lesson.

Beloved Community, we worship the God who calls us to make a joyful, thankful noise, along with all the earth. Why? To remember, to notice, to give thanks, for all that God has done. And for simply being a small part of God's amazing creation. Whenever we do this, we ground ourselves again in the truth of who we are and whose we are in the Big Picture. And friends, this is Good News. Whether we feel like it or not, we are all God's children, we are the sheep of God's pasture. The Good Shepherd for whom 99 out of 100 sheep was not enough. We belong to God whose steadfast love endures forever, God's faithfulness to all generations. Future-mongering symptoms include forgetting this shared status, our irrevocable inheritance.

Perhaps, I am beginning to answer a question you may have wondered when you looked at the bulletin today: "Why are we talking about being thankful *today*, preacher. That was last Thursday – four days ago." The day that the Packers beat the Detroit Lions 29-22. That's two wins back-to-back. We are on a roll. Packers fans (I think there are a couple in these pews and choir loft), did you remember to give thanks for the joy of that victory? Or are you stressing about their next game on Dec. 3? If not the football aspect of Thanksgiving, perhaps, you are thankful that you simply traversed a family get together without any major blow ups. Or if there was a blow up, maybe you are thankful that you have 361 more days, give or until next Thanksgiving!

On a more poignant note, you may be thankful that you got through your first, or fifth, or twenty-fifth Thanksgiving without a certain loved one seated at your table. At our Thanksgiving, I wore an apron our now 32-year-old daughter, Hannah, embroidered for her grandma (my mom) when she was about 12 years old. It helped me to feel my mom's presence, now the fourth Thanksgiving without her here with us on earth. Perhaps you used a recipe or a dish from a loved one who now sits at the heavenly banquet table. We feel their absence like a with an ache of longing in our bodies. Yet, the bitter sweetness of remembering those deep loves can also bring forth a gratitude of great magnitude. *If* we remember to look back and give thanks.

"Remember with joy our own baptisms, the promises made on our behalf, and those who made them." You heard me say this earlier in the service during the baptism service for Blayne Logan Zais. This is a call to remember the deep narratives of our own original blessing all through the ages. Part of our Sacrament of Baptism today is this outward sign of baptismal waters, as a tangible way to claim our connectedness and grounding in God. Creator/Redeemer/Sustainer of all through all. All at once we look back with thanks to the generations before us to help us consider the future with bright hope for tomorrow. Great is God's faithfulness. Even greater when we remember it.

Raise your hand if you have ever had a problem remembering the password you created for an account or subscription or credit/debit card? Or any other password protected aspects of your digital life? So many passwords to make up and remember. And I know you're not supposed to use the same one across all your accounts and you are supposed to keep changing them if you want to maximize your security. But then keeping track of them in a secure manner—this can be a challenge. Especially as we age, and our memories get a little more... shall we say, unreliable. Why am I talking about passwords in a sermon about gratitude? Simply put: expressing gratitude to God is your password into God's presence. That one doesn't change and it's easy to remember. It works well - even in the worst of times. Taking a breath and choosing gratitude toward another person you are struggling with can also break the logjam in surprising and powerful ways. Yes, the Love of God and the Love between people flows from the same river. Grace, overflowing. If we remember the password. And use it.

I can tell you in over thirty years of pastoral ministry, I have experienced the power of gratitude as a gateway into the green pasture and still waters of God's Love and Peace, again and again in in pre-op hospital bays. The question sometimes surprises the person lying in the bed, or the loved ones holding their hand, as they are about to undergo surgery and we are getting ready to have a pre-operation prayer, and I ask, "What are you grateful for, right now." Or by a family having their worst day, gathered hastily, snatched from their expected day, because of a sudden unimaginable loss. Grateful? Yes. Even and especially in the valley of the shadow of death. Jesus has said, "knock and the door will be opened"—we find that invitation from his Sermon on the mount, to the Book of Revelation. And yet the thought of connecting with God in prayer may seem more remote and more difficult than remembering your passwords, on your worst day. Or on a dull, ho hum day. Regardless of our mood or circumstance: Gratitude is the gateway, the password into God's mystical presence, friends!

Let's try it together, right now. *Think back on the ways God has been faithful to you:* has healed your heart, protected you from harm, opened a way forward when you thought all was lost. A time when you were surprised by grace. Or when a door was shut or slammed in your face, and somehow a new window opened. It could be something large or small in your life. What comes to mind? I will give you 15 seconds to see what comes up for you; then invite you to turn and share a piece of what came up with a person sitting near you, for 45 seconds. Then I will signal it is time to give the other person 45 seconds to share and the first talker to become the listener. [If you are worshipping remotely by yourself, or reading this sermon, take these precious seconds to share with God in verbalized prayer, or in writing, what comes to mind.]

First step, before we begin, determine who will be your person you will pair with...
 Now we will begin with 15 seconds of silence to remember a way or ways that God has been faithful to you. Ready set, go.
Next: First person, starts sharing what you thought of...
Finally: Now switch, let the other person talk...

So, friends, you probably thought I'd never ask: "What's Next?" Advent! I invite you to let Advent be a season to *practice authentic gratitude*. May it be a season where we make the counter-cultural move to slow down, rather than speed up. Where we make it a season to notice what we are doing with our attention. A season where we change up the rhythm and routine, not to get busier, but to breathe, to take a beat, to look back and say thanks: to God, and to all who are or who have been blessings in our lives. Maybe someone you've been meaning to call or write or text. Many of our committees and boards are not meeting this December, to help us with this goal. This year's Advent Devotional Booklet could help you practice gratitude. And we have Kristina Kaiser's class that starts tomorrow night, "Being With" in the Parlor or by Zoom.

For now, I will leave you with Mary Oliver's poem calling us to gratitude titled, "Messenger"
My work is loving the world.
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird—
equal seekers of sweetness.
Here the quickening yeast, there the blue plums.
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?
Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect? Let me
keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,

which is mostly standing still and learning to be
astonished.
The phoebe, the delphinium.
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.
Which is mostly rejoicing, since all the ingredients are here,

which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart
and these body-clothes,
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy
to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,
telling them all, over and over, how it is that we live forever.ⁱⁱ

ⁱ Brother David Steindl-Rast, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer: An Approach to Life in Fullness*, (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984, p. 91.

ⁱⁱ "Messenger", *Thirst: Poems by Mary Oliver*, (Boston, MASS: Beacon Press, 2006), p.1