

**“With Grateful Hearts”**

Luke 17:11-19

Rev. Dr. Tim Archibald

A while back, Neil, the teenage son of a friend of mine, spent a week in Uganda and returned home talking non-stop about George, a man who makes \$2 a day selling eggs and grain. George and his wife, Sarah have four children of their own, plus they have taken in George’s brother’s six children who were orphaned by AIDS. Next door, their neighbour is a single mother with nine children—whose husband went off to Sudan to find work and was never heard from again. This single Mom next door and her nine children lived in a small hut doing the best they could until George built them two more huts so that they would have more room. This mom and her nine children often eat with George and Sarah and their 10 children—what’s ten more? George even gave Neil and each of the other visitors from North America a gift before they left. Neil is captivated by George, a happy, content and very generous man.

If you lived on \$14 a week how generous would you be? Where does all this generosity come from in George? In a word—gratitude. About eight years before George was given a piglet and eight chickens by a church-based NGO (nonprofit organization). George—like the one cleansed leper who returns to thank Jesus—now wants to share the grace that he has received. I’m quite sure that those “other nine” *former-lepers* in today’s Gospel were **thankful**; they had been cleansed of that rotten flesh-eating disease that not only disfigured, but turned out the leprous person from family and community to live out their days in abject poverty as outcasts. So I’m sure that they were absolutely thankful for this dramatic remaking of their lives as their skin was restored, and their disfigured faces shone with newness. Maybe they even mouthed a quick thank you prayer—like one we might say at our Thanksgiving Dinner Table—yet in their enthusiasm for the gift, they completely forget the giver. They had families to see, businesses to attend to, meetings to go to, shopping to be done, housework to do, kids to raise, sports games to attend... well you get the idea.

Gratitude—being thankful—is an essential practice of Christian faith, and it is constantly under attack by North American consumerism which claims that the source of joy is not in God, but in a new pair of shoes, a trip to the Caribbean, or a flat-screen TV. In our culture gratitude is a subversive activity; because a lot of people spend a lot of money every day trying to keep you from being grateful. Instead they want you to think a lot more about what other people have rather than what you have—so you’ll want more. They want you to think a lot more about what you don’t have rather than what you do have—so you’ll want more. If you want more you will buy something from them,

so that they'll have more. They have a lot to gain from stimulating your greed—what the 10 commandments call coveting. But more stuff does not make you happy.

In a worldwide happiness survey they discovered that most people in the world are happy most of the time, regardless of age, sex, income, education or country of residence; and affluence actually is not a big factor in determining the level of happiness. The greatest deterrents to happiness are hunger, oppression, war and poor health. But once a minimum standing of living is attained in each of these areas, like George's – people are generally happy. Here are two other interesting points from the happiness survey: Firstly, Community Trumps Materialism—relationships enhance life more than the pursuit of things. A 1% improvement in worker-boss relationship improves happiness as much as a 30% increase in salary. And secondly, Generosity Trumps Selfishness—people who give away more are happier than those who give away less, regardless of income. Those who did favours for others in the last year felt happier than those who only received favours. Or as Jesus says: It is more blessed to give than to receive.

According to this same study, every \$100 we spend on ourselves will have no detectable effect on our happiness; but that same money, if given to the hungry, the ill, the oppressed or to the developing-world will dramatically increase our happiness. The argument for us to give more of our money to the poor is now both religiously and scientifically irrefutable.

It's not how much you have that brings happiness; it's how much you appreciate however much or little you have. Jesus knows that gratitude is the greatest secret to happiness and contentment. Brian McLaren says: The more we have, the more we need to practice gratitude; otherwise we will be taking more and more of what we have for granted and that ingratitude will eventually lead to unhappiness. And if we have less, we will need to practice gratitude, so that the little we have is *greatly* appreciated; for this will count for more happiness than if we had much that is *little* appreciated. So well-off or poor, we all stand in utter need of great gratitude.

In today's Gospel, it is this one who is a foreigner, who has a different colour skin and speaks with an accent who turns around in exuberance and shows us what true gratitude looks like. He's shouting joyful gratitude to God, making a scene, singing and falling on his face at Jesus' feet. Tears are streaming down his face. "Thank you, Mr. Jesus, thank you. Thank you, Mr. Jesus, thank you." In NT Greek *healing* and *salvation* come from the same word. Being "made well" in the latter part of the passage refers to *salvation*. This man has had a radical confrontation with the mercy of God and has come to offer his entire life. The offering plate is passed and he puts in his whole self.

He's been born again; he has had his eyes opened to what's really valuable in life and everything now looks totally different. Now, nothing but his whole self will be enough to offer back to Jesus for the gift of healing, wholeness—salvation.

In gratitude, the cycle of perpetual dissatisfaction is broken and we begin anew to recognize all that we have, rather than what we don't have; we begin to acknowledge the miracle of who we are, instead of who we aren't. We begin to wake up to the goodness and generosity of our amazing and great God. Brian McLaren tells of what it was like when his now adult son was diagnosed with cancer as a boy. Day after day he and his wife experienced the realization that the child they had that day might be gone a year later. He concludes: Although cancer took a lot from us, by stimulating gratitude, it gave us far more than it took.

Even in pain we can find a place of gratitude. McLaren says that the attitude of gratitude is more valuable than any insurance policy. You may lose your job, but you can still be grateful for what you have left. You may lose some facet of your physical health, but you can still be grateful for what you have left. This new day, this breath, this moment, this song, this taste, this view, this kiss, this meal, again we open ourselves to see the daily-ness of all God's goodness, love and provision. After all, when everything is said and done, our "chief end" is not so much what we accomplish in the run of a day, but rather our "chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him for ever." God created us with a capacity to enjoy the gifts he gives us; and what could be better than enjoying those gifts with God? After all, isn't that what gratitude is, joining God in the enjoyment of the goodness of creation that surrounds us.

So now I want you to practice gratitude by taking the next bit of time (as Laura plays) to ponder the good and great and wonderful things that you are grateful for today. As each comes before you, simply hold it in a spirit of wonder and like the grateful Leper, say thank you to Jesus --the great giver, the designer of all goodness—the source of our healing, our wholeness and salvation. And let your thanks resound to God, silently, within you, or aloud. And if you need to imagine our dancers from last Sunday dancing with joy then let yourself dance in joy and thanksgiving to God.