

Attitude of Gratitude

Sermon for October 14, 2007

Year C, The Season After Pentecost

Proper 23

Scripture Readings

Psalm 66:1-12

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

2 Timothy 2:8-15

Luke 17:11-19

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells ten lepers to show themselves to the priests. On the way there, they are healed. Only one of them turns back to thank Jesus. We may ask ourselves, "what about the other nine?" We may look down at them as ungrateful. However, they may simply be obedient. Jesus told them to go to priests and they went to the priests, presumably at the Jerusalem temple. There they may have "given praise to God."

We might remember that Samaritans did not accept the Jerusalem temple and its priests as legitimate. Remember that in the Gospel of Luke, the Samaritan village refused to provide Jesus with hospitality since he is on the way to Jerusalem. Therefore, it should not surprise us that when a Samaritan is miraculously healed, he would choose to go back to his healer, Jesus, to give thanks to God, rather than go ahead to the Temple.

Therefore, the difference between the Samaritan leper and the other nine may have not been a difference in their feelings of gratitude. Instead, it may have been a difference in their understanding of who Jesus was.

The response of the lepers, like all human responses, is a combination of an emotional response and a choice. Human beings, like our animal friends, have two basic sets of emotional drives. Scientific research has shown that these drives are built into the

structure of our brains. One set of drives pushes us to join with other people—drives of affiliation. These emotions include vulnerability, compassion, play, and sexual attraction. Another set of drives pushes us away from other people. These emotions include vigilance, anger, and fear.

These emotions are triggered by events in our environment and evoke a response from us, even before we are consciously aware of our feelings. Sometimes we respond to other people's actions without thinking, either with an in-born innate response or with a response that we have learned in our family and culture. We may smile or frown at, or move towards or away from another person without thinking or even being consciously aware that we are doing it.

As a dog person, I can say that dogs and people are not very different in how they unconsciously respond to their fellow creatures. However, unlike dogs, human beings can use reason and will to either reinforce or override their emotional responses. We expect a dog to respond the way it has been trained to respond. We expect a human being to make choices. Research has shown that white Americans have an unconscious learned response to treat people with a different skin color with suspicion. We can simply accept that response as "natural" or we can consciously choose to override it.

The Bible uses emotional words like love, fidelity, mercy, faith, and hope to describe the Christian life. However, when we pair these words with the adjective "Christian" they are no longer simply emotions. As Christians, we take natural feelings, such as love, and consciously transform them to something much more lasting and powerful. CS Lewis called Christian Love "an affair of the will." It is a conscious and deliberate choice to behave in a loving manner toward God and neighbor. It takes the

natural emotional love of a parent for a child and transforms it into a conscious attitude that controls our thoughts and actions. It means taking our natural inclination to do what “feels right” and cultivating it into an attitude that helps us consistently do what we know to be right.

It is painful to have conflicting feelings about a situation. It is also painful to choose to go against our feelings. Sometimes when we go to help our neighbor, we are so suspicious, angry, and afraid that we lose confidence in our ability to love them. They may dress strangely, have a different skin color, smell funny, and do not seem to share our “family” values. Some of them are not even Christians! It is not surprising that the first thing missionaries used to do was to give the “natives” a bath and a haircut, and a shirt and a pair of pants to wear to church. It feels more comfortable to help people if they look more or less like us. Fortunately, today’s missionaries know that you can preach the Gospel while respecting local traditions and customs.

A Christian is challenged to Love their neighbor, even if they do not “like” them. Amazingly, Christians find that the more they act “as if” they love their neighbor, the more kindly feelings they begin to have towards that neighbor. CS Lewis stated it this way, “the Christian, trying to treat everyone kindly, find himself liking more and more people as he goes on—including people he could not even have imagined himself liking at the beginning.” One of the signs of growing in your faith is that your Christian thoughts and your natural feelings are more and more often in harmony.

In Jesus, we find this integrity between thoughts and feelings raised to the highest level. In our Bible study, we have been learning that in the Gospel of John, Jesus emphasizes his closeness to the Father: "Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by

himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.” Jesus fully understood the will of God and he knew what he needed to do to fulfill it. Nevertheless, Jesus was not simply a robot programmed to carry out God’s laws. Jesus’ feelings are fully engaged in his relationships with others. In the Gospel of John, Jesus makes a conscious choice to allow Lazarus to die so that Jesus might raise him back to life as a sign of the resurrection. However, Jesus fully experienced the emotional impact of that choice, “When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ‘Where have you laid him?’ he asked. ‘Come and see, Lord,’ they replied. *Jesus wept*. Then the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’”

Jesus knew that we would need help to discern God’s will and develop the strength to act in conformity with the will. The Gospel of John emphasized that Jesus has sent us an advocate, who will teach us all things and will remind us of everything Jesus said to us. This is just another demonstration of God’s unfailing love for us. As C.S. Lewis said, “Though feelings come and go, His love for us does not. It is not wearied by our sins, or our indifference; and therefore, it is quite relentless in its determination that we shall be cured of these sins, at whatever cost to us, at whatever cost to Him.”

All ten lepers must have had feelings of gratitude when they saw that they were healed. However, only one of those lepers understood that the place to thank God for that healing was not at the Temple, but at the feet of Jesus. All ten of the lepers were physically cured. However, there was only one of whom Jesus could say, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” Amen.

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