

Life-Giving Gratitude/To Reteach a Thing Its Loveliness Luke 17:11-19

Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC in Camden, October 13, 2019

¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³ they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" ¹⁴ When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵ Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶ He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? ¹⁸ Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹ Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

Once upon a time, before all the technological amenities were available that we are accustomed to, two men became neighbors in a hospital room. Mr. Wilson and Mr. Thompson were both seriously ill. Mr. Wilson, whose bed was next to the window, was suffering from complications from previous surgery but was able to sit up in a chair from time to time with the help of the nursing staff. Mr. Thompson had just survived a serious accident that had left him with many broken bones and completely confined in his bed, flat on his back. He could hardly move and was extremely worried whether he would ever walk again and return to his home to live on his own. Mr. Thompson was getting quite depressed.

Mr. Wilson noticed his roommate's struggles and decided to entertain him by reporting everything he could see out of the window. He was hoping to get his neighbor's mind off his worries, and to help him imagine the beauty that was still there in the world and, therefore, also in Mr. Thompson as well. So, Mr. Wilson would offer elaborate details about what he was observing:

- There was a beautiful park with a lake with ducks, geese, swans.
- There were flowers and trees to be described in lavish detail and the children who played near them. At noontime, employees from a nearby

office building sometimes brought their lunch to the park to relax in the beauty of nature.

- There was also a small baseball diamond on one side of the park. On a lucky day, there was an actual ball game to describe. Mr. Wilson would give a running commentary about the plays being made or not made.
- One day, there was even a parade going by and Mr. Wilson excitedly described all the floats passing below their window down on the street. He commented on the decorations and the people on the floats in outrageous costumes.

As much as Mr. Thompson actually enjoyed Mr. Wilson's descriptions of the world "out there," he grew increasingly jealous that he couldn't have the spot at the window for himself. It all felt like insult added to injury. Mr. Thompson even found himself getting short with Mr. Wilson from time to time. When Mr. Wilson was released from the hospital, Mr. Thompson felt a mix of sadness and relief. When he finally got his bed moved closer to the window, Mr. Thompson caught the coveted glimpse of the view. As it turned out, Mr. Wilson had been staring mostly at a brick wall 15 feet away. He had made up all his animated descriptions to keep his neighbor engaged.

We can probably appreciate Mr. Thompson's frustration, fear, and increasing sense of isolation in the midst of his suffering. It can easily happen that we get trapped in our own pain. It can become difficult to take in the gifts and blessings that do continue to be in our lives but somehow become harder to see. Theologian Barbara Brown Taylor once wrote: "You cannot accept God's gift if you have no spare hands to take it with. You cannot make room for it if your rooms are already full." Mr. Wilson had offered a mirror of beauty and goodness but Mr. Thompson was turning circles in his own internal hamster wheel of suffering. He had no spare hands to take the gift.

As I mentioned last week, one of the central teachings of a number of mystics

and also the field of human development is the need to have others mirror love and belonging for us and we, in turn, become a mirror for the other.¹ All of creation takes part in helping each other see the beauty of God already alive in each of us. We are all giving glory to God by our mere existence. This is not about being perfect but about relationally belonging in which we can be received and transformed beyond our failings or sufferings, (which are by no means necessarily the same).

The Irish poet, Galway Kinnell, expresses this mirroring in his poem called “Saint Francis and the Sow.”² I am quoting a portion from it:

*The bud
stands for all things,
even for those things that don't flower,
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;
though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on its brow
of the flower
and retell it in words and in touch
it is lovely
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing;*

“To reteach a thing its loveliness” - this is our shared task and blessing. Sometimes we need to remind each other of that loveliness within and around. Another key element to our well-being is our related capacity to be grateful for our lives, for our loveliness and that of others, and of creation as a whole. The heart of our Gospel story is about “reteach[ing] a thing its loveliness” and the role that gratefulness can play in the bud flowering in its fuller beauty.

¹ These reflections are directly inspired by Father Richard Rohr’s reflections offered in a talk entitled: “*In the Footsteps of Frances: Awakening to Creation.*” It is available as a CD through the Center of Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Rohr also refers to the poem used later in this sermon.

² Galway Kinnell, “Saint Francis and the Sow” from *Three Books*. Copyright © 2002 by Galway Kinnell.

In our story, Jesus meets ten lepers just as he is entering a village. Because of their dangerous skin condition (the term would have included a variety of skin conditions), they have all been confined to the margins of their community. They are not allowed to interact closely with others and are usually left to beg. So they reach out to Jesus “from a distance” and call out to him: “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” Note that Jesus doesn’t ask how they got sick or wonder who is or isn’t worthy of healing and being restored to their community. He invites them all to act on faith and show themselves to the priest. A priest had to declare them clean before they could fully return as a member of their community. If they were to arrive unclean, the priest would keep his distance and not receive them. Jesus does not create a miracle on the spot and does not actually touch them. Without any evidence, they have to decide whether to get on the road and trust they will be healed before they can actually see healing happening. We might say they had nothing to lose but they could have opted for resignation instead of moving forward in faith.

They are healed while they are on the way to the priest. However, only one of them turns right around to express how grateful he is for this transformation. He is a Samaritan. Samaritans were spiritual cousins of Jesus but were looked down upon by many Jews. Supposedly, Samaritans had mingled too much with other cultures and religions to the point that their faith had been defiled. In part, this story holds up a mirror to Jesus’ own contemporaries that they could learn a lesson or two about faithfulness, gratefulness and “loveliness” from those they label as OTHER (like Namaan in the story from II Kings 5:1-14). This also means that God’s healing love extends to all who suffer in the world and is not limited to a particular group of people.

Jesus asks why the other nine who have been healed didn’t come to give thanks. Having said that, Jesus didn’t tell them per se to return and give thanks. Their lack of expression of this gratitude also does not bar them from receiving healing. The one who returns seems to be most in touch with the

reality that his very life, his every breath is a gift given by God and not to be taken for granted. Maybe the others do not even yet fathom the depth of God's love for them as God is seeking "to reteach [them their] loveliness." The Samaritan did not only trust Jesus, he sensed that Jesus was mirroring to him his own loveliness beyond leprosy, and the possibility of transformation and restoration. The former leper who returned also mirrored for Jesus how brightly God shines through the life of Jesus. Both were left with greater joy.

At some level, we are all lepers so to speak. Maybe we are dealing with a physical illness that leaves us feeling isolated or unlovable. Maybe there is a wound inside that keeps us disconnected from others, from God and even ourselves. Maybe abuse, discrimination, incarceration and other debilitating messages and conditions have caused us to forget the self-blessing or loveliness God has planted within us all. Maybe we have hurt someone else so much that we don't see how we can ever be forgiven. Maybe we have gotten hurt so badly that we feel we can never trust again and keep our distance. I pray that we may be empowered to become mirrors of each other of the bud or beauty and potentiality in each of us that we may be restored and retaught our loveliness.

May we also consider the riches of gratefulness which also feature in this story. Kristi Nelson, a cancer survivor who teaches about gratefulness, speaks of it as an overall orientation to life (see Brother David Steindl-Rast: gratefulness.org) that is not contingent on something that happens to us either positively or negatively. Kristi urges us to practice gratitude on a more existential level for that which we do not have to earn, i.e. our very breath, the gift of each day of being alive as a miracle, the gift of unconditional love. In this spirit, I would like to ask you to try giving thanks in the coming days before you even get out of bed: thanks for this day, for your breath, for the warmth of your home, for people who love you,...

There are times when we may not have spare hands to receive or perceive what is good. If we practice such gratitude, we at least stand a greater chance of staying experientially connected to a deeper calm, perhaps even joy, that is not so quickly derailed by difficult circumstances as was the case with Mr. Thompson. May the Holy Spirit teach us such life-giving gratitude that we may be able to mirror it for each other, reteaching each other our loveliness. Amen.