

Thesis: To practice gratitude is to practice faith; to practice faith is to practice gratitude.
Scripture: *Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well* (Lk 17:19).

If you were present last week, you might remember that the gospel began with the disciples saying to Jesus: "Increase our faith." Do you remember Jesus's response? HE said, "*If you had the faith of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.*" As we all know, the mustard seed is a very small seed so it appears that the size or quantity of faith is not what matters.

In today's gospel, which immediately follows last week's gospel in Luke, ten lepers cry out to Jesus for mercy. This story ends with Jesus saying to the one leper who returns to Jesus after being healed, *Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well* (Lk 17:19). *Your faith has made you well* – This is one of those verses from scripture that has been problematic, doing perhaps as much harm as good.¹ How often have some Christians prayed for something to happen and when it did, they then patted themselves on the back, congratulating themselves for their strong faith? Unfortunately, the reverse all-too-often happens as well. One prays to recover from an illness or accident and when it doesn't "work," we determine that our prayer must have been inferior or that we just lack enough faith. It's as if we sometimes think of faith as being all about cause and effect – you pray for something, and it either happens or it doesn't, depending upon whether or not you have enough faith.

But today's gospel story invites us to ponder a more profound understanding of faith. In this story, the actual healing of the ten lepers is almost a sideline. Jesus does this miracle of healing without fanfare. The lepers simply cry out for mercy and Jesus tells them to go show themselves to a priest, a necessary religious requirement that would permit these persons to be re-admitted back into their homes, families, and community. As they go, they are made "clean."

Please note, all ten of these lepers are healed, not just one. But now the story shifts to the one. He is identified as a Samaritan – a foreigner, a person who would have been treated as a despised outsider in Jewish circles. When this man sees that he is healed, he doesn't just go along with the other nine. First, we're told he **turns back** or returns to Jesus.² Second, he **praises** God. Third, he **worships** (literally "fell on his face"). And fourth, he **gives thanks**. Jesus, when he comments on this, emphasizes the turning back and the praising God: "*Were not ten made clean? . . . Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?*" And it's after this that Jesus then says, "*Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.*" Jesus is clearly referring to a "wellness" that goes beyond the man's healing from leprosy; for the man had already been healed of that infirmity.

This wellness runs beyond the physical. Though the other nine were also healed of their leprosy, their failure to return may indicate something about their inner character and spiritual well-being. At best, their failure to return reveals a sort of **utilitarianism**: "Well, that worked, didn't it!" At worst, it reveals a sense of entitlement: "Well, I certainly deserved that!" It's the same sort of "cause and effect" utilitarianism that Jesus discourages when he talks about "faith the size of a mustard seed;" and the sort of entitlement he condemns in the parable he tells immediately after his pronouncement about mustard seed faith, the parable about the master and the servant (*all found in last week's gospel, Luke 17:1-10.*)

It appears that Jesus is telling us not to be concerned with the quantity of faith – whether

¹ Much of the content of this sermon is modified from Kimberly Bracken Long, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4; David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Louisville, John Knox Press, 2010) 164-168.

² West, Audrey L.S., *New Proclamation, Year C, 2010–The Season after Pentecost*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010)

we have enough to make our prayers “work”, and to be careful about thinking we deserve God’s grace by our own rights. Jesus seems to be teaching that the nature of faith, a faith that can make one well, is exemplified by the behavior and actions of the leper – the one who returns to Jesus, praises God, worships, and give thanks.

On other words, *Living a life of faith is living a life of gratitude*. Let me repeat that: ***Living a life of faith is living a life of gratitude!*** For Jesus, “faith” and “gratitude” are very closely related; perhaps two words for the same thing. **To practice gratitude is to practice faith; to practice faith is to practice gratitude.** Faith, therefore, is not something we have (or possess) but something we **do** – a response of turning back to God with praise and thanksgiving: acknowledging that God is the giver of all good gifts in life; acknowledging that God holds all of life in God’s providential hands; acknowledging that when we live a life of gratitude, we are at the very heart of God’s hope for the human race and God’s intent for each of us. Practicing gratitude leads to a faith that “makes one well.”

There is evidence that Jesus knew exactly what he was talking about. There is a web launch entitled, “*Boost Your Health with a Dose of Gratitude,*” put together by a medical group. The essay cites thousands of years of philosophic and religious teaching urging gratitude. It then cites new evidence that grateful people, for whom gratitude is a permanent trait, have a health edge. It may be that grateful people may take better care of themselves, but there is evidence that gratitude alone is a stress reducer, that grateful people are more hopeful, and that there are links between gratitude and the immune system. C.S. Lewis observed this connection between gratitude and personal well-being when he wrote: “*I noticed how the humblest and at the same time most balanced minds praised the most; while the cranks, misfits, and malcontents praised least.*”³

Unfortunately, in the normal course of a day, many of us find ourselves overly consumed with the events and encounters of the day. We tend to focus on whatever is right before us. At the same time, we’re thinking about what will come next. It’s not that we’re not thankful for unexpected graces or gifts that come our way, but gratitude “does not usually flow from us like a steady mountain stream all through our day.”⁴ The other nine lepers – it’s not that they weren’t thankful; it’s more likely they just so excited to get on with their lives, back to their families that they failed to return and give thanks to the one who had healed them.

If then gratitude is so closely related to growing in faith, how can we cultivate a life of gratitude? First, recognize that gratitude is a choice – the Samaritan leper chose to return to Jesus and give thanks.

Second, realize that gratitude is something that anyone can learn through practice. One spiritual director recommends the practice of writing regular thank you notes to God; why not cultivate such a simple practice into our spiritual lives, that of intentionally thanking God. Some people write hymns or poetry, filled with thanksgiving. Many of the Psalms are laments, bespeaking of great longing and anguish, but even these Psalms inevitably conclude with words of praise and thanksgiving to God. I’ve found that identifying ten things for which to thank God each night as I lay in bed helps to cultivate gratitude.

Although all these practices tend to focus on being thankful for things that are in the past, as one progresses in the practice of gratitude, one will find that rather than being grateful in hindsight, our soul will begin to be on the lookout for ways to see God’s grace and be grateful for it. And, as we grow in the spiritual practice of gratitude, we will find our faith expanding. Then we too will hear Jesus say, “*Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.*”

³Quoted in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4; David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Louisville, John Knox Press, 2010) 165; quoted from C.S. Lewis, *reflections on the Psalms* (London: G. Bles, 1958), 78-81.

⁴Miller, M. Renée. *A Guide to Spiritual Practice: A CREDO Resource*, “Gratitude Practice.” Copyright © 2010 by CREDO Institute, Inc. All rights reserved.