

**“The Grateful Samaritan”**  
**Reverend Bill Gause**  
**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**32<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**November 10, 2019**

**First Scripture Lesson: Psalm 103:1-5**

<sup>1</sup>Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. <sup>2</sup>Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits— <sup>3</sup>who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, <sup>4</sup>who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, <sup>5</sup>who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.

**Second Scripture Lesson: Luke 17:11-19**

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



**Sermon: *The Grateful Samaritan***

Thanksgiving is only a little over two weeks away. You might not realize that since a lot of stores have skipped right from Halloween to Christmas. I was at a presbytery retreat at Deer Creek State Park Sunday through Tuesday and they were piping Christmas Music over the sound system 24-7. It was interesting to walk to breakfast at 8:00 in the morning as Jingle Bells played over the PA system.

Jingle Bells is normally considered a Christmas song, but if you think about it, the lyrics actually have nothing to do with Christmas. Composed in Medford Massachusetts by James Pierpoint, the song actually commemorates sleigh racing which was common in that area at that time. So, it’s more of a drag racing song than anything else. One source even calls it “A drinking song written by a jerk.”<sup>1</sup> Later in his life, Pierpoint became the music director of a church in Savannah, Georgia. There, he introduced his congregation to Jingle Bells during a Thanksgiving Day service. So even though it has become closely associated with Christmas, Jingle Bells might be better categorized as a Thanksgiving song.<sup>2</sup>

Part of what makes Christmas fun and special are the songs and stories, of which Thanksgiving has very few. Your hymnbooks include 10 songs in the Thanksgiving section. Meanwhile the Christmas and Advent Section contains 61. There also aren’t a lot of good Thanksgiving stories, either. Outside of the first one with the pilgrims and *A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving*,<sup>3</sup> there aren’t very many. But one of the best is Luke’s story of the ten lepers being healed by Jesus. Now, you might not immediately associate this story with the Thanksgiving holiday because there aren’t any turkeys or pumpkin spice, or family dinners mentioned. But it *is* a simple story of people who have been given everything and of how they respond to the one who gives it to them.

Now Luke describes these people as “Lepers,” but we know that the disease we call Leprosy or Hansen’s Disease, is probably not what he was talking about. In Luke’s time, Leprosy was a generic term that referred to a whole category of skin ailments that featured scaly, rough patches and discoloration like psoriasis, eczema, acne, and ringworm.<sup>4</sup> Leprosy was so feared that people believed to be suffering from it were banned from their towns and villages. Leviticus 13 says the person with leprosy “shall live alone, their dwelling shall be outside the camp.”<sup>5</sup> They were literally untouchable.<sup>6</sup> And their illness couldn’t be a private matter, either. When someone approached, the person with leprosy had to announce themselves as “unclean,” so the other person wouldn’t accidentally come into contact with them.<sup>7</sup> So, to be branded a leper was to be subject not only to physical pain, but also to tremendous psychological and emotional pain from isolation and rejection. It could very-well be that these ten are together because all they had for companionship and support was each other.

But when Jesus came into their village, or perhaps the village they were living outside of, his reputation had preceded him and these ten came to meet him. Maybe he could do something. Maybe this wonder-worker they had heard so much about could work a wonder in their lives, too. So, they approached, but not too close. They didn’t want to be accused of breaking the law. They didn’t want others in the crowd of people who followed Jesus to be threatened by them; by their sickness and the damage it might do should it spread. So, they stood off a bit and Luke tells us they “called out” to Jesus: “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” One might imagine the rising pitch of desperation in their collective voice, as they

waved and tried to catch Jesus' attention, like the urgent pleading of the cast-away trying to flag down a passing ship, in fear it will slip by and disappear over the horizon, and with it their last, best chance at salvation. And somehow, over the babble of the crowds, over the appeals of others wanting to experience Jesus' divine power, over the shouted supplications of the sick and disabled and dying, Jesus heard them. And he had mercy on them.

But Luke doesn't describe a miracle of healing in that moment. He tells us that Jesus sends them to the priest to show themselves and it is on the way that they are "made clean." Why does Jesus send them to the priest? Because it is the law. If you are healed of a disease or condition that made you unclean, you had to be examined by a priest and get his "Okay" before you were really free of that illness, and more importantly, the stigma that comes with it.<sup>8</sup> The symptoms might be gone, but you are still "unclean" until the priest says you're not.

So, they go, and on the way, the healing or the Holy Spirit or however God's power is made manifest comes upon them and they are made well. Hallelujah! They have not only been made whole, they have been set free! The only thing left to do is show themselves to the priest, just as Jesus instructed, just as the law requires, and they can then return to their homes and spouses and families. They can rejoin their communities; sit at the bar and enjoy a cold one with the boys again, walk in a crowded street and jostle against strangers again without fear of being punished. They can walk the streets without having to announce their affliction to strangers ("Unclean! Unclean!"). This is a miraculous, life-giving turn of events. They have hoped and prayed for salvation such as this. But their healing will only be accepted by the community if the priest signs off on it. So, when no one stops to show gratitude to Jesus, maybe we can understand the dreadful breach of etiquette. Maybe if we put ourselves in their place, we can understand why they didn't stop to say thank you.

But Luke tells us that one of them did stop and turn back: a Samaritan. And the careful reader will remember that just a few chapters earlier Jesus told a parable about someone who embodied the love of God and neighbor; who stopped to help a wounded stranger and, contrary to community expectations, that person was a despised Samaritan.<sup>9</sup>

As soon as he realizes that something has happened in his body; maybe the itching stops, maybe the pain deadens, maybe the visible signs of reddened, scaly skin have disappeared; whatever it is that makes him aware, it stops him in his tracks. And the emotion that overwhelms him is gratitude. He knows that there is still more that has to be done; that he is not yet considered clean by his community, but there will be time for that; the priest is not going anywhere. Jesus on the other hand, is a travelling man, there is a good chance he will have moved on by the time the Samaritan gets back and if that happens, he may never be able to truly express the depth of his thanks to the one who has shown him mercy; to the one who has healed him and given him his life back. So, he returns to the place where he met Jesus. Because giving thanks is the most important thing for him in that moment. So great is the gift; so precious the life that has been returned to him, that he can't do anything else.

We know that he has done nothing to receive this precious, life altering gift but ask for it. And Jesus has demanded nothing of him before giving it. Awash in the very mercy of God and aware that he has encountered something truly holy, this Samaritan is not bound or required to respond in thanksgiving, but he can do nothing else. His gratitude is reflexive; it is as automatic as his joy. And we see revealed before us the truth that Grace experienced begets gratitude lived.

Most of us will never know what it feels like to be given your life back. Craig Coley knows. He spent 38 years in prison, wrongfully convicted of a double-homicide committed in 1978. But Detective Mike Bender took a look at his case in 1989 and saw something amiss. Realizing that Coley was actually innocent, Bender had been working to free him ever since. In 2017, DNA evidence proved Coley was not the killer and California Governor Jerry Brown issued a pardon. The first place Coley went after being released from prison? To the home of Detective Bender to express his gratitude.<sup>10</sup>

Tim and Shawna know, too. Their daughter Caitlin was born with a tumor on her liver. After five months of hospital stays, and surgeries and procedures and one incident where she went into cardiac arrest and almost died, Caitlin was put on the liver transplant list. Two days later, her family got news that a transplant was available. The donor was a young man named Jeff who had died in a tragic fall. His family was devastated by their loss, but because of him, Caitlin was given another chance at life. Today she is a happy normal first grader. But she keeps a picture of Jeff in her room along with a candle in her window to honor his memory and his life-giving gift. Caitlin and all of her family members are now organ donors themselves and they actively encourage others to register too.<sup>11</sup>

Grace experienced begets gratitude lived. Or at least it should. Our stories of gratitude may not be as dramatic as Craig or Caitlin, or they may be far *more* dramatic. But we experience God's grace and mercy and steadfast love every day: In the love and support of family and close friends who laugh at our dumb jokes and tolerate the fiftieth retelling of that old story about that one time we did good; In the way chocolate sauce makes ice cream even more perfect than it already is;

In the way a smell or a sound can take you back to a gloriously perfect memory; In the way a child's words spoken at the right time and in the right way can move you to tears.

We experience God's grace and mercy and steadfast love in the test results that come back negative and in the presence of loved ones when they don't; In the realization that the lost thing that was so important, only fell behind the cushions; In the way light dances on the leaves of a perfect fall afternoon; In the way food tastes when you're hungry; In the days that go by uneventful, peaceful, with not a single thing of interest happening in them; In healing when it's unexpected, kindness when it helps most, generosity when it is most desperately needed, joy when days are difficult.

The lesson we learn from this grateful Samaritan is that we should be always aware of the abundance of God's grace that touches us daily, and we should always be living our lives in a way that expresses gratitude to God for that grace and goodness.

We look for miracles and indulge our disappointment when they don't happen. But our lives abound with the good harvest of grace, mercy, and steadfast love. And in recognition of that truth, our gratitude to God should be automatic, reflexive. And it should exist not just in our words, but in our deeds; not just in expressions of gratitude in prayer and praise directed toward God, but in routines of service and love and of our own acts of grace lived toward others.

In a couple of weeks we will celebrate the Thanksgiving Holiday. We will spend time with family, probably eat more than we should. We'll watch football and if the weather allows, spend some time outside enjoying the beauty of fall in Ohio. When we sit down at table, we'll offer our prayers of gratitude. We'll reflect on God's blessings. We'll say words of thanks. But God's goodness to us will continue on the next day and the next and all the days that come after that, so our lives should be lived as continual thank offerings to God. We shouldn't just *give* thanks, we should *live* thanks. There is nothing more important for us to do.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> "The Secret History of Jingle Bells, a Drinking Song Written by a 'Jerk' | CBC News." *CBCnews*, CBC/Radio Canada, 19 Dec. 2014, [www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/jingle-bells-christmas-song-started-as-a-drinking-song-written-by-a-jerk-1.2874860](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/jingle-bells-christmas-song-started-as-a-drinking-song-written-by-a-jerk-1.2874860).

<sup>2</sup> "The Secret History of Jingle Bells..."

<sup>3</sup> Schulz, Charles M. *A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving*. Performance by Todd Barbee, et al., Lee Mendelson Film Productions/CBS, 1973.

<sup>4</sup> Pilch, John J. "Leprosy." *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 3, Abingdon Press, 2008, pp. 635–637.

<sup>5</sup> Leviticus 13:46, NRSV

<sup>6</sup> Leviticus 5:3, NRSV

<sup>7</sup> Leviticus 13:45, NRSV

<sup>8</sup> Leviticus 14:1-32, NRSV

<sup>9</sup> Luke 10:25-37, NRSV

<sup>10</sup> Fry, Wendy. "Man Wrongfully Imprisoned for Decades Free on Thanksgiving." *NBC 7 San Diego*, NBC 7 San Diego, 23 Nov. 2017, [www.nbcsandiego.com/news/local/Man-Who-Spent-Nearly-40-Years-Behind-Bars-for-Crime-He-Did-Not-Commit-Speaks-Out-459619243.html](http://www.nbcsandiego.com/news/local/Man-Who-Spent-Nearly-40-Years-Behind-Bars-for-Crime-He-Did-Not-Commit-Speaks-Out-459619243.html).

<sup>11</sup> "Thank You for Giving Caitlin Back to Us." *OrganDonor.gov*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, [www.organdonor.gov/statistics-stories/donation-stories/caitlin-liver-recipient.html](http://www.organdonor.gov/statistics-stories/donation-stories/caitlin-liver-recipient.html).