

“BEING Thankful”

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Text: Luke 17: 11 - 19

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This past summer, the first day of our roadtrip to the west coast would be the longest drive: from here to Merritt BC. We struck out early, making good time. We stopped a couple of times in the national parks for short hikes to stretch our legs. We had a bite of lunch while driving, eating our packed lunch. As we passed through Salmon Arm I checked the fuel gauge and I thought, “yeah, we have enough fuel to get to Kamloops.” Press on! Later, while I was pumping gas in Kamloops, I pondered how we could travel 700 km’s and not speak to a soul...do it all on our own. Self-reliant. And then I began to question that assessment. I looked at the nozzle in my hand and thought about the countless, nameless people who helped get the fuel to this pump, and along the way turned the Fort McMurray bitumen into gasoline. Then there were the people who built and operated the hydro-electric dams, who were managing the transmission lines, all so this pump had electricity to do its job. The people who maintained the Trans Canada highway that we were driving—a road that made the journey possible. Park workers who maintained trails we walked. The people working for CBC radio: working in the summer while we were enjoying summer vacation and listening to them. Then there was the coffee I was going to buy: hand-picked by Juan Valdez in Columbia, processed, shipped, and now hot and ready and waiting for me. We’d been on the road 8+ hours, in isolation, assuming our trip depended only on ourselves. But as I poured gas into my car, I began to appreciate the countless thousands of people who made the journey possible, easy! A sense of thankfulness came over me that my self-centeredness prevented me from seeing at first: a blessing.

And talking about driving...I live in the neighbourhood called Woodbine in the south west. For the past two years our part of Calgary has been road construction purgatory. It’s 22 km’s from my home to our church, and for the past 2 years almost all of the first 11 km’s has been restricted by seven different road projects. Some days getting back and forth from home have been torturous. What was free-flowing in the morning can be a traffic jam in the afternoon. And the location of speed limit changes seemed to change week by week... resulting in me receiving two speeding tickets this past year. But then, one day, while stuck in traffic (again!) I reflected on my slow-burning resentment that had become a persistent attitude. I had to confess: what we were enduring in our neck of town was really only short-term pain for long term gain. As for the people who were working on our many improvements, I have watched them working in rain and snow, in heat and bitter cold, in the middle of the night and on weekends...all for the sake of commuters like me. As I sat in traffic I acknowledged that there was nothing I could do,

so let the frustration go, and be thankful for the improvements we will have in our neighbourhood. After that day my various forays by car have been much easier. And as some of those projects are now completed, I now know the benefit. A blessing.

Two simple stories about gratitude, and about two things that get in the way of feeling gratitude: 1] our lack of awareness and appreciation, and 2] our attitudes. A pretty common story. So common that the same things got in the way for nine people who Jesus healed of leprosy. Leprosy was not only a devastating wasting disease but it was also socially isolating. There were a lot of rules governing the life of lepers in order to protect people. It's why they called to Jesus from a distance. So when they discovered they were healed, it meant the end of their physical suffering and the end of social isolation. What a gift! They would have been so excited. The urgency to get to the priests, who would certify them as healed, would have been intense. The thought of how much life had instantly changed for them pushed away any recollection of Jesus. They were so thrilled with the gift, they forgot the giver. How human.

Thanksgiving is a day that prompts us to reflect on the givers of the gifts we receive. There's a simple formula for doing that. First, consider our experiences in life—even the experience of life itself—and to think of our experiences as gifts given to us. Blessings. A gift is always an act of grace: something that we don't earn, something that is given at some expense by the giver. In any moment of life we can ask, how is this experience a moment of grace? The answer to this question helps us know what we are thankful for. Thankfulness is the only response to grace received. Then, ask yourself, who deserves credit? The answer to that question helps us know who to be thankful to. Who is the giver?

The apostle Paul encourages us to "be thankful." In thinking about this encouragement again I was struck by the word "be". BE thankful. When we think about how humans are wired, we often recognize a difference between "being" and "doing". Doing always has a purpose and the purpose is fulfilled by an action. Being, on the other hand, is often a recognition of something that is our nature. Is ingrained into us. So a person can have a thankful nature. I wonder if that is what Paul is encouraging here? That we as Christians have a thankful character. He did, after all, encourage us, writing "in everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you" (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Similarly he wrote to the church in Ephesus, "Give thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:20). For us to give thanks in everything, we would need a thankful nature, wouldn't we? A nature that keeps us aware of grace we benefit from....appreciates those experiences as gifts....as blessings...and have an attitude that naturally responds with thankfulness.

So a thankful nature, it seems, needs to be rooted in our being. “BE thankful.” But, I think getting there takes some doing. After all, recall my stories about pumping gas in Kamloops and reacting to road construction as personal suffering. A sense of thankfulness did not arise in me innately in those moments. It didn’t for the lepers either. It takes some doing to develop. I know that was my mom’s goal at Christmas. At the age of 9 I was dazzled by the gifts I received—so much so that I never gave a thought to the gift giver. But my mom always insisted that we hand write thank you notes to all the givers. It seemed like such a burden, especially when there were so many great new toys to play with! My mom was not just ensuring I fulfilled a social duty—she was after something much bigger. By doing this—and doing many other things as well—she was trying to instill in me an attitude of gratitude as well as a habit of expressing gratitude. Our bedtime prayers consisted mostly of people and things we were grateful for. She made a point of reminding me to always thank someone who had been helpful to us. Doing thankfulness, over and over and over, was a way of weaving an attitude of thankfulness into my personality, into my being. And it took—mostly—though I find it still takes some doing to develop, even now.

And that brings us back again to Paul’s encouragement: to give thanks “at all times and for everything.” Do it all the time. As you read Paul’s letters one finds it seems Paul practiced this himself. The majority of the New Testament letters (traditionally attributed to Paul) jump right from the opening greetings to expressions of gratitude. Romans: “I thank my God for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world.” Corinthians: “I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God given you in Jesus Christ, for in every way you have been enriched in him.” Philippians: “I thank God every time I remember you...because of your sharing in the gospel.” Colossians: “In our prayers for you we always thank God...for we have heard of your faith in Jesus Christ and the love you have for all the saints.” If you give these expressions of gratitude a careful read, you find that the thanks offered is as much to God as it is to the people he was writing to. To Paul, if there is some gift we’ve given to another...some gracious act we’ve performed for another, for Paul it is only because that was first given to us, enabled in us, inspired in us by God. And so Paul could say, “Give thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Every gracious gift we receive, no matter where it comes from, always starts, somehow, with God.

Perhaps the hardest part of Paul’s encouragement is that he wrote, “Give thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything.” There are certainly things in any of our lives that we can find hard to be grateful about. I think here it can be helpful to pull back and engage that awareness and appreciation. “Where is there grace in this?” A cancer diagnosis can be devastating, causing one’s world to collapse onto you. But where might the gift here be, even in something as scary as cancer? Well, not knowing you have cancer means there will be no possibility of treatment. One can be thankful for the diagnosis. The gift can be in the aid of our health care system. The gift can be in the rediscovery of how much your family and friends love you and come to you in your need. I have heard these things and more talking to people with cancer. Plus one more. I can’t count the number of times people have expressed confidence

in the midst of illness because of their gratitude for the presence of God. So often people have said to me, “how do others who do not know God face cancer?” Giving thanks to God “at all times and for everything” can actually be a blessing to us.

But here is the final blessing, that we find circling back to the story of the lepers. One leper had the awareness and appreciation about what had really happened—a miracle. He knew what to be thankful for. He also knew who deserved credit. The story tells us that he “turned back praising God.” Jesus observed, “but weren’t there an additional 9 lepers also healed? Where are they?” They didn’t return to express gratitude...but they were healed all the same. A gift is always an act of grace. It doesn’t depend on who we are and what we’ve done. So it was with God’s grace that day. And how it still is today.

That, to me, seems like the greatest thing to be thankful for: God’s free, unmerited grace. If we live with the attitude that “every gracious gift we receive, no matter where it comes from, always starts, somehow, with God”, then perhaps we will find it easier to do as Paul encourages: “Give thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”.