

Wesley United Methodist Church

Rev. Beverly E Stenmark

November 19, 2017

Text: Deuteronomy 8:7-18

Luke 17:11-19

Title: Give Thanks

In his sermon “The Attitude of Gratitude”, James W. Moore tells about his very active three-year-old granddaughter Sarah. One afternoon, she interrupted her playtime to run into the kitchen in search of a midafternoon snack. “Hurriedly, she said to her mother, ‘Banana, Mommy, banana!’” Her mother handed her a banana. “Sarah quickly grabbed the banana and turned to rush back out of the kitchen. Before she took very many steps, however, her mother said, ‘Sarah, what’s the magic word?’ Sarah screeched to a halt, turned around, and said, ‘Please! Thank you! You’re welcome!’ and then, ‘I love you, Mommy.’”

He continues, “Thanks-giving, gratitude, appreciation – whatever you want to call it – is learned. We don’t come into this world as grateful people.”<sup>i</sup> When we are born, we are pretty helpless. We need attention and care from those around us and about the only way we know how to get our needs met is to cry. Initially, we don’t have any other way of telling people what our needs are, and no way of saying “Thank you.” It is something we learn as we get older and begin to have words to use.

Some people learn the lesson and attitude of saying thank you well, but others seem to get too busy or tend to assume that they deserve what they get and forget how to give thanks.

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus has been traveling along the border between Samaria and Galilee. Galilee was a Jewish region; but the people of Samaria were people with whom Jews normally did not associate. Luke tells us that a group of ten lepers saw Jesus and called out to him. Leprosy

was a terrible disease and those who had been diagnosed with leprosy were no longer allowed to live in their homes or to have any physical contact with their spouses, children, or friends. They had to keep about half a football field distance between them and other people to avoid contaminating others.

From this distance the men called out to Jesus and begged him to have mercy on them. Luke tells us that when Jesus saw them, he told them to go and show themselves to the priests. Only priests could declare a person cured from leprosy. As they went, they were made clean – their leprosy disappeared. Immediately they all turned around and came back to thank Jesus for healing them. At least, that's what we would think would happen, but it wasn't.

Nine of them continued on their way to see the priests. One of them stopped and turned back and began to praise God. One of them came close to Jesus, even lying face down on the ground in front of Jesus to give him thanks. The one who returned was not a Jew. He was a Samaritan. This, in and of itself, was unusual. As I said, Jews and Samaritans did not normally interact with each other. Yet, the group of ten lepers included at least one Samaritan. Faced with the common tragedy of their leprosy, they had allowed the barriers of religion and race to be broken down and they had come together only as men in need.

There is no other story in all the gospels that shows so dramatically human ingratitude. The lepers came to Jesus with desperate longing, and he cured them. Nine never came back to give thanks.

But what happened when this Samaritan came back, when he lay in the ground at Jesus feet to say thank you? Luke tells us that Jesus asked the crowd, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?"

Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except for this foreigner?”

What about the other nine? I suspect that when they realized that their leprosy was gone, all ten were excited. I imagine that the other nine might have even started to run to get to the priest even quicker, so that they could be declared clean and so that they could have their lives back. They would have been thrilled that they would soon be able to be with their families again. I imagine they were impatient to be able to hug their spouse and children and even to be able to go back to work to provide for their families again. I'm sure that they were excited and, so they rushed even quicker so that they could return to a normal life.

I imagine them back at home later, telling their family and friends about their healing. I imagine that they were thankful that Jesus had cured them. I wonder if they ever regretted not going back to thank Jesus, or if, as is so common with us, they simply went on about their lives, got busy again and maybe even forgot about Jesus.

But the one who came back probably had a different experience. After drawing the attention of his disciples and those with him to the fact that only one returned to praise God, and that the one who came back was a foreigner, Jesus then said to him “Get up and go on your way, your faith has made you well.”

What does that mean? All ten were cured of their leprosy. I don't for one-minute think that when the others failed to come back but instead followed Jesus' instructions and went to the priests to be declared clean, I don't believe that Jesus caused them to have leprosy again. God doesn't do that kind of thing. They were cured of their leprosy, but this Samaritan, according to Jesus, was made well.

The word used here, is “Sozo” and that means saved, or true wellness, complete wholeness. It means salvation. Jesus cured nine men of the disease of the flesh, their leprosy, but the tenth man received more. He received a wholeness of life; he received salvation. And this happened when he returned to Jesus and gave thanks.

Because of the bazaar this weekend, I needed to be sure that this sermon was finished on Friday. I struggled on Thursday and went to bed Thursday night anticipating a tough day of writing.

Friday morning, I woke up thinking about a book that I thought I remembered. When I located it, I discovered that it wasn't really what I remembered, but it turned out to be more than I remembered. I really didn't remember any of it, but I know that I had read at least the first half of it because I found things highlighted in it, but on Friday morning, I was gifted by God with something more.

The book is called, One Thousand Gifts: A Dare to Live Fully Right Where You Are by Ann Voskamp. What I thought I remembered was her keeping a diary or gratitude journal in which she wrote 1,000 things for which she was grateful. That was true, but what I found was so much more. Ann lived a difficult life, that included seeing her two-year-old sister killed by a truck that accidentally ran over her, while Ann, herself, was only four. Years later, in this book she describes her journey from existing to living fully each day. It began with learning about giving thanks to God. I don't want to oversimplify her journey, but I do want to share some of it with you because it is relevant to the whole idea of giving thanks.

Ann observes that even in the Garden of Eden, we have always wanted more than we had. She speculates that the sin of Ingratitude is

really our original sin, with Adam and Eve being ungrateful for what God had given them.

The writer of the book of Deuteronomy seems to have recognized this same thing. Before Moses' death, before the Hebrew people crossed over the river into the promised land, Moses warned them to be careful and to remember what God had done for them. He warned them that they were about to enter into a land where there would be plenty of food and water, unlike the grain or seeds that they had been eating each day off the ground. They knew that God had provided them these seeds, or manna every day for forty years, but now they were going into a land with wheat and barley, vines, fig trees, pomegranates, olive trees, and honey – a land where they could eat plenty and lack for nothing.

He knew that initially they would give thanks to God for watching over them and for bringing them into this land. But he also knew that they would have to be careful. He knew that after they had eaten all that they wanted and gotten used to it, and built fine houses for themselves and lived in them, and when their herds and flocks had multiplied it would be easy for them to give credit to themselves and to forget what God had done for them. It would be easy to forget that God had led them out of the land of Egypt, out of slavery, through the wilderness, through the land of poisonous snakes and scorpions. It would be easy to forget that God had given them water to drink and food to eat each day. He reminded them that the very power to get wealth, the strength to do the things they would be doing, came to them from God.

Last week in our scripture, we heard Joshua give almost the exact same speech to them many years later, after they were settled in the land. Joshua reminded them that they had to choose which god they were going

to serve and warned them of the danger of forgetting the God who had brought them out of Egypt and slavery.

Ann Voskamp, like so many of us, has struggled with why horrible things happen and while she doesn't believe that God causes these things to happen, she recognizes that there are things we just do not understand. Speaking about the Hebrew people wandering in the wilderness for forty years she writes, "When we find ourselves groping along, famished for more, we can choose. When we are despairing, we can choose to live as Israelites gathering manna. For forty long years, God's people daily eat manna, a substance whose name literally means, "What is it?" Hungry, they choose to gather up that which is baffling. They fill on that which has no meaning, more than 14,600 days they take their daily nourishment from that which they do not comprehend. They find soul filling in the inexplicable."<sup>ii</sup>

Eventually, she started to notice the many places in the Bible where Jesus gave thanks – including one so familiar to us that we almost fail to hear it. "On the night, that Jesus was betrayed, he took the bread, gave thanks." Yes, even on the night that Jesus was to face death, even on that night, he ate with his friends, and he gave thanks to God.

It is not a matter of giving thanks to God in the middle of horrible things, but rather Thanksgiving is giving thanks in everything, even and especially in what seems the most ordinary. When we can give thanks in the most ordinary of things, we open the way for us to recognize and really experience God's presence with us in the most difficult times. We open the way for God to show us the fullness of life and salvation in Christ.

Thanksgiving, or giving thanks, is one way of us saying yes, to God's grace and love. Giving thanks is necessary to live a life that is whole, and

that is full. The leper who returned and gave thanks, has opened himself to receiving more than a cure for his skin disease. He has opened himself to receiving all that God really wants to give us, and which we so often miss.

Ann was challenged or dared by a friend to write a list of 1,000 things that she loved. When she started that she wrote, “That is the beginning and I smile. I can’t believe how I smile. I mean they are just the common things and maybe I don’t even know they are gifts until I write them down and that is really what they look like. Gifts God bestows. This writing it down – it is sort of like .... Unwrapping love.”<sup>iii</sup>

She says that at first it was a challenge, but that by seeing and naming things like the colors the sun makes when it shines through a piece of glass, or the sounds of laughter her children made playing outside, or even having arms and legs that allowed her to pick up a jacket that a child dropped on the floor, or to prepare a meal for her family became important. She said that “In naming that which is right before me, that which I’d otherwise miss, the invisible becomes visible.”

I love that phrase, “In naming that which is right before me, that which I’d otherwise miss, the invisible becomes visible.” “The invisible becomes visible.” There are so many things in our daily lives that we simply do not see because we are so busy rushing from one thing to another, or trying to accomplish something, or worrying about what might happen or .... You know what the things are that help make the little things invisible in your life.

Sometime after she started making this list of 1,000 things, a friend observed that she was different and said that she thought it had to do with that list she was keeping. Ann reminds us that when we “Give thanks in

this one small thing, the moments will add up.” In another observation that caught my attention she said, “Slapping a sloppy brush of thanksgiving over everything in my life leaves me deeply thankful for very few things in my life.” I had to stop at that and then realized that she was right.

I can say that I am thankful for my children, my grandchildren, my health, a roof over my head, heat, electricity, food and so forth. But the danger is that when we lump everything together we tend to miss them and end up not really being thankful for anything. However, those little moments that we really pay attention to make a difference.

I don't think I will ever forget my oldest grandchild, coming home one day when she was just barely walking and seeing me in her house. Her little body shook all over with excitement and then she practically threw herself across the room to get into my arms. That moment is one that I will always treasure.

When I pick up my grandson at daycare and he spots me across the playground and yells, “Nana”, I give thanks. I store up those memories for the day when he will think he is too old to acknowledge me in the presence of his friends. Because I know that day will come.

Ann writes that “the dare to write down 1,000 things I love – is really a dare to name all the ways that God loves me.” I want to invite us this week to pay attention to those little things. Give thanks to God for the things that we often overlook. Whether you gather with others around a table piled high with food, or sit at home by yourself, give thanks that you have food to eat and teeth that can help you chew. Whether your time is with people you love or people who drive you crazy, give thanks that they are all children of God, people God loves.

Remember that when Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?” God said to Moses, “I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I am has sent me to you.’” The Egyptians had many gods by many different names. Moses wanted to know God’s name so the people would know exactly who had sent him to them. God called himself “I Am” a name describing his eternal power and unchangeable character. In a world where values, morals, and laws change constantly, we can find stability in our unchanging God. The God who appeared to Moses is the same God who can live in us today.”<sup>iv</sup>

God is with us in the past, in the present, and in the future. God calls us to give thanks, and when we begin to give thanks we start to see abundance, rather than scarcity. The miracle of multiplying happens when we give thanks.<sup>v</sup> Let us give thanks to God and let us begin in the small ordinary things we can find.

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<sup>i</sup> Moore, James E. *Attitude is Your Paintbrush*, Dimensions for Living, 1998, p.16

<sup>ii</sup> Voskamp, Ann. *One Thousand Gifts: A Dare to Live Fully Right Where you Are*

<sup>iii</sup> Voskamp

<sup>iv</sup> Exodus 3:13-15, Note from NIV, Life Application Bible

<sup>v</sup> Voskamp