

TEXT: Luke 17:11-17 On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!' When he saw them, he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, '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 this foreigner?' Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'

WELL I GUESS I COULD be like the pastor who announced to the congregation, "I have good news and bad news. The good news is that we have enough money to continue building our church for another year. The bad news is that it is still in your pockets."

However, despite the fact that we are asking those who are willing to make a financial pledge for 2009, today is not about money. Today is about gratitude – the kind of gratitude that unlocks the fullness of life.

There is a wonderful Midrash about a man who goes to the rabbi and complains, "Life is unbearable. There are nine of us living in one room. What can I do?" The rabbi answers, "Take your goat into the room with you." The man is incredulous, but the rabbi insists. "Do as I say and come back in a week." A week later the man comes back looking more distraught than before. "We cannot stand it," he tells the rabbi. "The goat is noisy and filthy." The rabbi then tells him, "Go home and let the goat out. And come back in a week." A radiant man returns to the rabbi a week later, exclaiming, "Life is beautiful. We enjoy every minute of it now that there's no goat -- only the nine of us."

Gratitude. It is a matter of perspective. It is what causes someone to say, "The barn burned down last night. Now I can see the moon."

Paul Krugman, professor of economics at Princeton University, remarked that the U.S. economy is suffering from a "crisis of faith." He was referring to the growing lack of trust in our economic institutions and the securities that have been used to back debt and extend credit. But it is worth noting that "credit" is a word that is a part of the language of faith. It comes from the Latin *credere* –to believe or to trust. The present active form of this word opens the Apostle's Creed, *credo* – "I believe." Our current economic crisis is at least in part about misplaced trust or faith

Pastor and writer Adam Hamilton goes even further: The underlying causes are not financial, but spiritual. At least five of the seven deadly sins came into play: gluttony, greed, sloth, envy, and ultimately pride, all came before the fall, and he applied this equally to lenders and borrowers.

And how does gratitude figure here? The credit crisis serves to point to the inadequacy of any ultimate credo whose object is anything but God. Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr reminds us that the church has a unique role in a pluralistic society. "There must be a realm of truth beyond political competence," says Niebuhr. As people of faith, it is essential that our first allegiance be to that "realm of truth."

Secure in this truth, we are respectful of the little gods of the world— governments, economic systems, religious institutions—for the roles they play in the organization of human society at a particular moment in history. But we do not worship them. The current economy wants to throw us into scarcity mode, but our God always invites into lives of abundance and gratitude, even in difficult times.

For we worship the God who spoke profound words of promise to people in exile: “Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my right hand.” (Isaiah 41:10) The Psalmists, too, during periods of adversity wrote words like, “God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea.” (Psalm 46:1-2)

Gratitude. We don’t give thanks because we are happy; we become happy because we give thanks. Our lives are not full because of easy living. We live in ease because we have counted our blessings, knowing God does not abandon.

Jesus said to first century peasants, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink. . . But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:25, 33). As we watched the Dow lose over 10 % of its value in two days this past week, it is well to remember Paul sitting in his prison cell writing his epistle to the Philippians. He’s awaiting the outcome of a trial that could see him executed, and yet he has the faith to write, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6–7).

And how timeless are those words written to Timothy — instructions for what he was to be preaching to the people of Ephesus, “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God” (I Timothy 6:17).

I think this is the message of our Gospel story. Remember those ten lepers? Keeping themselves at respectful distance, they cry out, in almost prayerful litany, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." It comes across as a chant, a ritualistic plea. It's hard to know what their expectations might have been. Perhaps for some food, or a blessing. But for complete healing? They had a hope born of desperation, but I doubt they had such an arrogant expectation.

I wonder what they felt when Jesus said, "Go show yourselves to the priests." Jesus didn't promise them healing in so many words. He asked of them an act of faith. Without any blast of trumpets or laying of hands, without any ceremony or promises or prostration, they were to go the priest and present themselves. Confused, surprised, stunned, suspicious, they must have looked at themselves, still disease ridden. Was this simply ridicule, another joke at their expense? Without understanding, and without fully daring to belief, they nonetheless turned, as a group, and started up the road.

The story tells us they were cleansed "as they went." It was in the *action* of that response, the trusting, that, gradually, in small spurts, sensation began to return. One by one, they started feeling the rub and scratch and tickle of wounds closing and new flesh swelling.

It's fun to imagine the awe and elation of those lepers as this reality sinks in! Life is restored! To touch, to run, to laugh, to join other people. I like to think of them

bounding up the hill, presenting themselves in awe to the priest, going forth with glee, ready to embrace life anew. All were healed. All were made whole. . Or were they?

Luke tells us that one leper stopped in the very midst of rushing forward. Only one leper -- and a Samaritan, a foreigner to boot -- turned backward to praise God and to thank Jesus. Even Jesus seems astonished at this. "Were not all ten cleansed?" he asks. "Where are they?" he turns to the tenth leper: "Rise and go. Your faith has made you well."

Made you well. "Made you whole" says some translations. "Saved you" says another. Ten were cleansed. But only one was made whole.

Surely this is about the turning back and saying thanks. And not just a polite child's thank you, He didn't just stick out his hand to Jesus, he fell on his face And the Samaritan gained a wholeness, a wellness, beyond the physical, a transformation that happened not in the healing itself. but in the acknowledgement, the gratitude.

What mattered was not the gift, but the relationship with the Giver.

If this is true, then this Attitude of Gratitude has relevance for this church. We all have challenges and crises. We have parents with failing health, we have our own health problems and fears. Holidays will highlight family feuds and bring up long standing hurts. Our lives include neighbor betrayals, retirement quandries, children at risk, the loss of a job, the uncertainty of moving, a school application rejected, a lawsuit imposed, financial loss and chaos. Our struggles are real. But so is our relationship with our Giver, the Giver of life, of blessings, or community, of hope.

Jesus calls us to recognize that gladness and sadness are never separate. Jesus calls us to be grateful for every moment that we have lived and to claim our unique journey as God's way to mold our hearts to greater conformity with God's own.

This church has taken on an audacious capital campaign and is fostering an outrageous tri faith vision. We have made a commitment to an ambitious family ministry. We plan to enhance music and worship, and certainly we intend to continue our ministries of hospitality and justice outreach.

And we will. Because we start with gratitude. If we live in that reality, then gratitude is not a sentimental exercise in denial, it is an investment in God's currency of grace.

If our goals are for the building up of God's kin-dome come on earth, then there will be manna, even in the wilderness. Grace will not look like we expect, it may not taste like we prefer, it won't be stored or hoarded, but it can be counted on.

We are all Samaritans. Given a second chance, offered renewed hope, a promise of life. Abraham Lincoln once told a newly freed slave, who asked what he could possibly do to pay for this gift, that he must walk the world with gratitude and live like a freed man. Friends, we too must walk the world with gratitude, and live like freed men and freed women.

Mary Oliver, in a poem entitled Gratitude would have you ask these questions of each day:
What did you notice? What did you hear? What did you admire? What astonished you?

What would you like to see again? What was most tender? What was most wonderful?

What did you think was happening? What will you do?

If you live in gratitude, what will you trust? What will you do?