

An Attitude Of Gratitude

AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE seems to saturate today's lessons.

In Jeremiah, the now aged prophet writes a letter to all the movers and shakers of Israel who've been force-marched into exile after Jerusalem and the Temple are destroyed.

The "best people" are moved to the capital city of the invaders, leaving behind the poor and those who would become one day the hated Samaritans.

You see, the invading Babylonians move the best and the brightest to their capital, but the rest of the conquered people are left behind in Israel.

To make up for the loss of population in Israel, and to water down hometown anger, the Babylonians bring in captive folks from all over the place, from Kakaako to Stockton and even some from Waianae, and marry them off to the poor Jews who remain...creating a people who are no longer pure....creating those who come to be known as the Samaritans.

But more about them in a minute.

What is really front and center this morning is that in the very midst of this unimaginable disaster, Jeremiah speaks of God's continued fidelity, God's continued faithfulness to his people: only now, it is in Babylon, not in your own home town, where you will "build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat, ... take wives and have children; and multiply."

Even in the worst conditions, God does not abandon even his faithless, renegade people, and Jeremiah, a true prophet, seems intent on cajoling his now departed neighbors to live with a sense of gratitude -- even in the circumstance of exile--even as captives in a strange land.

And so, even as captives in a strange land, they are to "pray for the well being of Babylon, for the well being of Babylon will be your well being."

This urging to pray for even those who cause catastrophe seems to anticipate the urging of Jesus that we love our enemies, that we pray for those who persecute us....attitudes one can practice only with a sense that, no matter the disasters in life, an attitude of gratitude is what marks a person of faith.

An attitude of gratitude also spills out all over Paul's letter to Timothy this morning.

Here's Paul, chained like a circus lion in a Roman jail, but he knows that God's word can never be chained: God's word is the word that heals, God's word is the word that turns around the most unlikely people.

Even in chains, Paul writes gratefully of the life faith has given to him.

And then we have today's gospel lesson.

It is an odd lesson.

Ten call out for help, but Jesus, rather than applying some mud to their skin or saying words of healing, merely tells them to go to the priest.

“Did he even hear us,” they may have thought?

“What kind of response is that to our request for healing?”

Only to keep walking down the road, and lo and behold, to look at hands and arms and feet and legs and, oh my goodness, it’s all gone!!

And so they keep walking....perhaps now in the direction of the priest, to get their Certificate of Cleanliness, since with that, they can go home.

Now that they’re cleaned up, they can get back to their lives: back to their wives and children, back to the bake shop and dry cleaning job....life is back to normal for them.

Because, a normal life means forgetting that they once were exiles.

It means rejoining a community that excludes the unclean and kicks out the diseased.

It means going back to a life that is and seems ever so intent on remaining: fractured.

Yes, they are cured, but they are not saved.

Only one is “saved.”

The better translation of what Jesus has to say to the grateful Samaritan man is not: “your faith has made you well.”

It’s better to hear it as: “your faith has saved you.”

When you hear religious folks today talk about being “saved” you’re usually listening to one of our evangelical brothers or sisters who insist that being “saved” means being part of the club: you’ve claimed Jesus as your savior, and so when the time comes, you’re on the up elevator rather than the down elevator....

(I’ve got elevators on my mind because our Bible Study is watching a documentary on notions of hell -- and there’s all kinds of elevators in that video!)

But Jesus, it seems, has something quite different in mind when he tells this twice outcast man (a leper AND a rotten Samaritan for goodness sake!) that he (of all people) is saved.

So what is it to be “saved” in the sense that Jesus is getting at this morning?

Will Campbell, a long time Baptist minister who died in June, tells the story of a small town in the south that was facing the reality of having their schools integrated.

A whole bunch of the good, church-going, townsfolk, representing only one color, got together one night in the school cafeteria, railing against “them” taking over “our” schools, how “we” aren’t going to let it happen, how “they” are a threat to “our very way of life.”

The hollering went on for quite some time until finally an old retired minister stood up.

He asked for the microphone, and as the crowd quieted down, the old minister said:

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, there is no black or white, there is no Chinese or Chuukese, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Now you all go home and read your Bible.”

The crowd hung its collective head, and stumbled home....and the schools in that town got themselves integrated without any more trouble....

See, this is something of what it means to be “saved” in the way Jesus is talking about it today.

This is the flash, the insight, and the joy that grabs the newly cleaned up Samaritan under his armpits and practically carries him, full steam ahead, until he falls at the feet of Jesus: “Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!”

The saving that Jesus inflicts on us isn’t warm or cuddly or cute.

The saving that Jesus inflicts on us, even if we don’t ask for it, is a saving that puts a dagger into the heart of our love of separating folks into insiders and outsiders, into races and classes and righties and lefties.

When Jesus is out saving folks, he puts an end to all the division we so lovingly and diligently create; and end to all of our efforts to tell one another: “keep out!” -- an end to every human attempt to stay safe from one another; and in its place, Jesus offers us a seat at the table in that great banquet hall, where everyone’s invited, with its glorious blinking red neon sign that shouts: “The Kingdom of God!”

Of course, there is an entry fee.

There is a key needed to gain access.

Last week we spoke of the key that unlocks faith.

That key, we reflected last week, is obedience.

This week, what we find from our Lord is that when the power of faith is unlocked, what comes pouring out, gushing out, overwhelming and uncontrolled, is gratitude.

We see it today in the Samaritan, we see it when Jesus raises in thanksgiving the four loaves and a few fish that will soon feed five thousand with leftovers to spare, we see it when the 72 return from their first mission, throwing out fearful demons and chasing away fear and anxiety; we see it as Jesus looks to heaven and exults in the God who reveals wondrous things to the small and the simple; we see it at the last supper when Jesus takes the bread and then the cup, as he gives thanks.....

An attitude of gratitude is not the mindless optimism that we often see in big haired TV preachers with those cheek to jowl grins -- it's not an assurance that all of life is rosy (if only you dial in right now with credit card in hand!); because you and I know from bitter experience that it just t'ain't so.

An attitude of gratitude is an orientation toward God that rejects the twin idols of our modern world: "I deserve" and "I despair" and replaces them with faith rooted in thanksgiving.

We can walk in this new direction because we encounter the God who is not some distant, disinterested old man sitting far away on a cloud; but because in Jesus, God comes and makes his home with us, in my kitchen, in your backyard.

God who is all in all, God, in whom we live and move and have our being, who is the source of all of creation, the sustainer of all the universe, the companion to us all no matter whether the news of the day is marvelous or tragic or simply mundane.

An attitude of gratitude, unlike mindless optimism or death dealing pessimism, is able to accept, with grace, whatever life may bring: whether the news of the day is a newly born granddaughter or whether the news of the day is a diagnosis of Alzheimer's in a loved one.

We can take it even further.

An attitude of gratitude is the natural human condition: not because of who we are, but because of who God is.

We are created to give thanks.

To withhold gratitude is like holding your breath -- it's not natural!

And there is something else too.

We can live an attitude of gratitude when our life is great and when our life is terrifying because just like the Samaritan and just like the Prodigal Son and just like the unjust steward and just like the gal caught in the very act of adultery --- God loves and accepts us in all that we are, with every foible and scar and weakness and sin -- he's not after us at our best, God is after us as we are....

Gratitude, my friends, is not so much a feeling as it is a way of life.

We have all experienced or seen others experience situations in life that feel more like curses -- and in those times, it's difficult, if not impossible, to feel grateful.

But perhaps if we begin to accept gratitude, not as a feeling, but rather as a way of acting, a way of living, what we may come to experience is a life lived that "presumes upon the grace of God," in other words, we may find in gratitude a way of living that never lets go of utterly depending on God's grace for all that we need, for all that we are.

Next week, God willing, we will baptize nine children, including Lisa Mitsuka-Chan's twin girls.

The nine will be anointed with chrism oil, just as each of you were at your baptism, and these words will be said: "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever.

May the mark they will bear, may the mark you now bear, be a life lived with an attitude of gratitude -- for this is the sign that we indeed belong to Christ.

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