

St James United Church

Message for October 9, 2022
Thanksgiving Sunday



“Connected by Gratitude” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Jeremiah 29:4-7; Luke 17:11-19; Excerpt from *Grateful* by Diana Butler Bass

We sing to God a grateful hymn of praise on this Thanksgiving, this day that seems to focus on turkey as much as gathering with family, even though when officially declared in 1957 its purpose was to give thanks to God for the harvest. It's not a surprise really. The roots of this day go back centuries, and for more than just celebrating the harvest, but giving thanks for safe passage across the ocean, the end of a war, the recovery from illness of a future monarch, any number of reasons for gratitude, and that is just among settlers, Indigenous peoples also having a long tradition of feasting to give thanks.

I'm grateful for that broad history of Thanksgiving in Canada. After all we don't need to wait for a particular day to give thanks, a truth captured in the portion from Diana Butler Bass' *Grateful* that Amy read, students and family alike whooping and cheering in the arena for the graduation, even the more culturally reserved of the audience caught up in the exuberant sharing of gratitude. The fact that the Bass family was impacted as they were reminds me of a key gift of being grateful also revealed in our reading from Luke 17 - the promise of cultivating connection.

Now the story doesn't start there. It begins with the opposite energy, that of disconnection. The ten men have all been categorised as having leprosy, not just Hansen's Disease but any number of skin conditions that made people ritually unclean and so had to live apart from their families, friends and community members. We hear of that disconnection from the very beginning of the reading, Jesus travelling through the borderland between Galilee and Samaria and so a place of marginality, of being on the edge of the community. What's more, they stand a ways off from Jesus when they make their request for him to help.

And yet there are also kernels of connection to come. The group travelling together is culturally mixed, at least one of them a Samaritan with the rest likely Galileans. As we know from earlier in the gospel, there is animosity between these two groups, as well as with Judeans, and yet their shared circumstance is a greater connecting point than culture. And they also speak to Jesus with a sense of familiarity, calling out to him using his first name. In response Jesus extends that hope of connection further, instructing them to show themselves to the priests, to in effect go to the Temple, the heart of the community and when declared to be clean, to be reunited again with their families, friends, and community members.

All this takes place in the borderland, an in between place and so hinting that there's hope of reconnection though it hasn't happened yet, at least for nine out of the ten. But for one, a

Samaritan, reconnection happens right away, and so he returns to thank Jesus. Now notice the language in what happens. The skin disease of all ten clears up, but only one is healed, made whole at that point not later. Why? Because of his faith, expressed in his giving thanks. If you recall from two weeks ago, faith is less about ideas than relationships. This is what he celebrates with Jesus, thanking him for the connections once again possible because he can return home. And as he is changed, so are we. It's no coincidence that the tenth leper is a Samaritan, an "enemy" of Galileans and Judeans. His gratitude invites us to see him and others in a new way, a reminder that borderlands are liminal, transformative spaces.

I feel this transformation is core to the story, not just in him being grateful for his connections but that being grateful actually helped him to connect, an important insight for all of us. In recent years there have been a number of studies looking at gratitude's role in emotional well-being, most finding that people who regularly count their blessings tend to feel happier in their day to day lives. It turns out it's not just people who are well-functioning this affects but those seeking treatment for anxiety and depression. In one study they found that participants in a test group tasked with writing letters of gratitude, a bit like what we did earlier, reported better mental health outcomes after the treatment ended, even those who never sent the letters, recounting why one is grateful effective enough on well-being. One suggested reason is that those who wrote the letters focused outward, on their relationships, rather than on their individual situation, seen in how when they wrote their letters they used more "we" than "me" words. It seemed to help them shift focus from negative emotions and experiences. Being grateful changes us in positive ways.

We see this as well in a spiritual practice taught by Richard Rohr known as respectful gazing. Respect means to "look for a second time". He notes that most often the first time we look at something we do it with self-focus, tending to think, "What's in it for me? Can I make money from it? Will this give me pleasure?" We need a second look to see what or who is in front of us as themselves and thus give them their voice. The practice of respectful gazing gives space to move past self-focus in our relating. It is simple. You go find something - a flower, a pumpkin, a bird - and give it respect, a second look, talking to it at first, even giving it a chance to speak back. It can be a liminal, transforming experience to grant respect to something we often think of as unimportant, perhaps to pause with gratitude for the pumpkin and say to it, "I thank God for you, and not just God, I want to thank you for being you, for letting me experience delight in your orangeness" or whatever else you might want to say to it. Just like how we saw the Samaritan differently, this simple spiritual practice helps changes how we see whatever we are respectfully gazing at, and more than that, as you are taken out of your self-focus, it helps you discover a connection not just to this one thing but to all things, a needed reminder in these times.

That's the heart of gratitude, helping us remember the ways we're connected. When we approach life this way, we put into practice Jeremiah's words to the exiles, focused on where we are, the blessings of the moment - a bountiful harvest, a safe ocean passage, the orange of a pumpkin, sharing a turkey feast with family. Being grateful helps us shift from just ourselves to others, and what we share in God. May it be our focus this Thanksgiving and every day. Amen.