

18th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 23C
2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c
2 Timothy 2:8-15
Luke 17:11-19

Pastor Melinda J. Wagner
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Portland, Oregon
October 9, 2022

Sometimes we need another person's help to see things as they are. A friend often tells a story that happened years ago when he was doing his pastoral training. One day he arrived at his internship site all out of sorts. Just nothing had gone right that morning. He started right in telling his woes to his supervisor. The car wasn't working right, the new baby kept them awake all night, his wife was at her wits end, the dishwasher was broken, his work load seemed overwhelming. The supervisor patiently listened, and when the student was done ranting, he replied, "I believe I know what your problem is." My friend raised his eyebrows, What? With a wry smile the older man said, "Ingratitude. That's your problem! Ingratitude."

There was a beat of silence, then they both broke out laughing. Of course! That "aha" moment showed my friend, the younger man, how his life really was -- not a series of inconveniences, but a series of gifts from God. He had been swimming in blessings but taking it all for granted: a loving wife, a healthy child, meaningful work, a car to drive, even a dishwasher, for heaven's sake! In this case he needed some well-timed (and old-time) Christian wisdom to shift his perspective from entitled to deeply grateful.

Sometimes we need another person's words or example to show us God's hand. In two of today's scriptures, it took an outsider to teach God's people about giving thanks.

The first outsider was very unlikely -- Naaman, commander of the Syrian army, actually an enemy of Israel. Naaman was powerful and successful, but leprosy threatened to take away everything. Naaman was so desperate for healing that he was willing to journey all the way to Israel based on the advice of a slave girl who believed her God, Israel's God, could heal him. So General Naaman traveled far and submitted to what he considered ridiculous directions from the prophet Elisha, to wash in the Jordan River seven times. But when he did obey, Naaman was healed completely. He came to see the God of Israel as the one true God -- and he made a special request that's not included in our reading. General Naaman asked the prophet Elisha for permission to take home with him a big pile of dirt, as much dirt as two mules could pull in a wagon. What did Naaman want with all that dirt? He believed that to worship Israel's God, he needed to stand on a piece of Israel's land. So he took some home.

I love that! I love to think of General Naaman back home in Syria, standing on that sacred pile of dirt, giving thanks to the God of Israel. Maybe in his courtyard, or his

garden, or wherever. Talk about countercultural. That sacred pile of dirt was his reminder that even though people around him might worship all kinds of different gods, the only God for him was the One God who had given him back his life. Even the kings of Israel kept traipsing off after idols, but there was Naaman in Syria, praying on his pile of dirt, practicing holy gratitude. What a reminder for himself and what a witness to those around him!

We often need that kind of reminder. I wonder, where is our pile of sacred dirt? Where are the times or places in our lives that we remember to give thanks to God who has in fact, given our very lives to us?

Giving thanks is countercultural for us too, because in our culture people worship many different gods... money, power, pride, being right. Americans most of all worship "the Big Me." We're taught to see ourselves as the center of the universe, look out for ourselves, congratulate ourselves constantly, especially as we amass more and more stuff. And truth be told, worshipping the self is our natural human tendency.

But faith teaches very differently. Faith reminds us that God is the maker and owner of everything. Even the life we live is not our own, it is a gift from God.

An amazing thing happens whenever – even just for a moment -- we get in touch with the sacred mystery of simply being alive. Stop our rushing to reflect. Pause to make space for wonder. We notice the miracle that we are breathing... with our breathing triggering reactions in our bodies that keep us living. It's extraordinary, that we even exist. It didn't have to be. We didn't have to be. Yet here we are, conscious, able to give and receive love. Astonishing. When we rest in gratitude, our spirits expand, love grows in us.

It is all God's gift. Our bodies, our time, our energy, our health, our families and friends, our livelihood and wealth -- all of these are God's gifts. Everything the world would say we "own" – money, car, home, dishwasher – it all actually comes from God's amazing generosity. To be aware is to be deeply grateful, to wholeheartedly give thanks.

When the world tells us, "There's not enough! Be worried! Be anxious!" -- faith focuses on the blessings we already have, and gives God credit. God does provide. God gives us what we need to live, and often more than enough to live – enough to share. Whenever we are tempted to focus on what's lacking, faith says: *Just look at all God provides!*

Since childhood we've heard the story of that one man who returned to give thanks.

Ten men with leprosy cried out to Jesus, and all ten men were healed. You can hardly blame the nine who hurried away to the priests to be declared clean and go back to

their families and their lives. Jesus *told* them to go to the priests, after all. But something extra special happened with that one man – an outsider, a Samaritan. Maybe because he was an outsider, he had no sense of entitlement, no assumption that he deserved to be healed. He was surprised, he was overwhelmed. And his instinct was to complete the circle of love by returning thanks to Jesus.

We do nothing to deserve life's blessings. We do nothing to deserve the loving, healing presence of God. But when we return thanks, when we complete the circle of love, it deepens the gift. Ten were healed, but only one man heard Jesus say: "You are made well, you are made whole." It seems that returning thanks, completing the circle of love, is something that makes all of us more whole.

It's important to realize that gratitude doesn't just happen. Gratitude is an intentional practice. Gratitude is a choice we make to view life positively and notice God's presence and give thanks even in the least likely circumstances.

I've known many people in desperate situations who find that choosing gratitude is a lifesaver. When they are at their lowest, battling illness or deeply concerned for a loved one, it might seem like they have nothing at all to be thankful for. But when they intentionally choose to practice gratitude, they notice small gifts to hold onto, and big gifts too. And it changes them.

I don't know how many times I've heard about the value of keeping a gratitude journal. I've even recommended it to others. But I didn't take up this practice until recently, when a friend shared how it improves her life, how much better it makes her feel. This friend has a lot of burdens, but each night before bed she writes down three things she is grateful for that day. It could be air conditioning, or a good meal, or something more weighty. Her gratitude practice only takes a minute. She doesn't always feel like doing it, but over time it's given her a more positive outlook. It gives her strength and hope.

So this summer I bought a little handmade book to write in. And in here I keep a prayer that says in part, "*Just for this moment, I will be grateful... I will take a few minutes to review the abundance that exists in my life today and place my future in the care of a loving God.*" When things seem dark or I'm worried, writing down a few words of gratitude helps connect me back with God.

This little book is kind of like General Naaman's patch of dirt – a place to give God thanks. A place to remember who brings the blessings into my life. A place to gain perspective on how life really is, and who God is.

Practicing gratitude is one part of growing more well and whole in our life with God. Giving thanks, giving God credit, is something that helps us mature in faith – and I know I want that kind of maturity to carry me, and carry my family. The more we practice gratitude, the more the gifts of faith and love will grow in us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.