

Twenty-first Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Rev. Jason Glombicki

October 9, 2016

Last Wednesday was our first small group gathering on spiritual practices. If you missed it, you should join us this Wednesday evening at 7:30 p.m. as we continue this exploration. Anyway, last week's topic was prayer. It was mentioned that there are only three types of prayer: help, thanks, and wow! Pretty simple. This suggestion comes from Anne Lamott, who is one of my favorite authors. In her book she suggests that prayers can be short. So short that it can be one word, namely help, thanks, and wow!

In today's Gospel reading we heard some of these simplified prayers. The story started when Jesus entered a village and ten lepers approached him. These ten people had some skin condition. It may be leprosy, as we know it today. It may have also been a variety of skin conditions that either was or appeared contagious. The important part is that these people were considered unclean. They were isolated, separated, and often poor. Their only companionship could be with each other. Their families, religious communities, and the city would have had nothing to do with them.

The text says, “keeping their distance, they called out” and, with that, we heard the first of Anne Lamott’s prayers – help! “Help us, Jesus. Have mercy, on us,” they cried out. Jesus sent them to the temple, a place they would have been forbidden to go, and on the way, they were made clean! Wow!

For most of them, this had to be one of those “knock your breath away” moments for the lepers - even more astounding than the Cubs’ chance of breaking the curse. The lepers were outcasts and then they were restored. They were separated from society and then they were integrated again. They could return to their families, their temple, and their society. What could you say to that but “wow”? I imagine it’s that moment where you know that whatever you just experienced didn’t solely originate on earth. There’s something transcendent. There’s something, something you can’t name or explain, except by saying “wow!”

Out of those ten that were healed, one turned back and praised God. This leper offered a prayer of “thanks.” Sure, the leper was healed like the others. In fact, the other lepers might have been thankful. Some of them might have taken it for granted. Yet, one leper, just one leper *voiced* his gratitude.

Why does that matter? Well, as one colleague puts it, gratitude is a response to a blessing or a gift, but it’s also a choice to see those blessings, to

name those blessings, and express those blessings in word and deed. When we express our gratitude, we affect those around us. In fact, we even shape the reality in which we live.

Think about it. Throughout our day we express a variety of emotions. There are reasons for these emotions - reasons for fear, for frustration, grief, anger, regret, and apprehension. These emotions make appearances on the stage of our lives. Each emotion has a place and role to play. We, however, choose how much stage time each emotion gets by giving it expression. We can't control our thoughts or emotions, but we can control our behaviors, our reactions, and our words. We can control what we name and emphasize.¹

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/10/pentecost-21-c-gratitude-and-grace/>

When you were a child you may have gotten gifts at a birthday or Christmas. After opening your presents your parents may have told you to thank your auntie or grandparent for your gifts. Turns out, they were on to something. No, they didn't want to make you miserable by taking you away from the new toy. No, they didn't want to make you lie, because honestly you're not that thankful for grandma's ugly and ill-fitting sweater. Your parents were trying to get you to realize that gratitude is an emotion worth noting and naming. Your parents were helping you recognize the moment of "wow" and then move you towards the importance of "thanks." You parent was saying, "Wow, it is amazing that you have people who love you! Now, go and name your gratitude, go and shape the world with your thanks, go and bless the person who blessed you." Oh, those sneaky parents.

"Help. Thanks. Wow!" Or in this gospel, "Help. Wow! Thanks." Or even "Help. Wow! ... (Ellipses.) Thanks?" So, why bother with the thanks? Does it matter? All the lepers were healed anyway, right? Sure, all ten lepers were healed. However, only one that we know of was "made well." This term "made well" comes from the Greek work σωζω (sōzō). Σωζω (sōzō) can be translated as "made well" or "saved," but my favorite is to translate it as "to be made whole."

You see, that's what gratitude does to us and for us. Sure, we can be fine, we can even be healed without thanksgiving, but to be whole, to be made well, to be saved from our self-centeredness, to be living into our full potential, and to receive the gift of today's Gospel, to receive all of that we're invited to embrace gratitude. We're invited to be thankful. We're invited to find eternal life in the recognition and naming of our blessings.

What a tall order this is! It doesn't always feel like that delicious tall pumpkin spice latte. There are so many things to fear. Like: what if *that* candidate wins? Hurricane Matthew reminds us that Mother Nature can kill us at any moment. A disastrous marriage. Estranged children. Sick loved one. Homicide rates through the roofs. Uncertain employment. Nasty co-workers. Mounds of debt. Tight clothes, saggy skin, and dark bags. Life is more exhausting than a marathon! When will it all get done? Who will do it? This world, this life...my life, why should *I* be grateful? So, sure, Pastor Jason, stand up there and say what you want, but don't tell me to be grateful. You've got no idea.

You're right. Voicing gratitude is not a command; instead, it's an invitation. It's an invitation that God offers over and over again. It's an invitation that we receive in our baptism - an invitation that Mila will remember on this date. We are reminded in our baptism that absolutely nothing can separate us from God's love. We're reminded that God's action, not our own, brings us wholeness of life. We're reminded that God hears our cry for "help." We're reminded that God is relentless in giving moments of "wow!" We're reminded that the invitation to give "thanks" is consistently extended, the invitation to wholeness is abundantly offered, and the invitation to be well is a pure gift.

So there it is - "Help. Thanks. Wow!" or "Help. Wow! ...(Ellipses.) Thanks?" You're in the driver seat. Today we're reminded of God's invitation to give thanks. We're invited to recognize the blessings among us. We're encouraged to name them and share them, so that our blessings might be a blessing. In that, we find salvation. In that, we find wholeness. In that, we see our God. Amen.