



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
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## Gratitude: A Holy Remedy

*Sermon preached November 26, 2020  
Thanksgiving Day  
Based on Deuteronomy 8:7-18; Luke 17:11-19*

*Let us pray: O Lord, awesome things will you show us in your righteousness, O God of our salvation; our hope of all the ends of the earth. Amen.*

We pause on this particular day as a nation to give thanks, which is our usual time-honored tradition. But this year, everything is dramatically and drastically different. This year, Thanksgiving is anything but “usual.” We are all now familiar with the disheartening litany—COVID-19 sickness and death, racial injustice and violence, economic inequity, the climate and the suffering earth, political division and animosity, and much more. It is a long and troubling inventory. As a friend of mine has often quipped, “2020—the year that keeps on giving.” And we keep receiving what comes, making our way through the best we can. Our priorities, our routines, the way we think about the world, the way we think about ourselves— everything has changed. We’ve had to give up a lot. We’ve had to take on a lot. And when facing myriad challenges it can be difficult to generate gratitude, especially on this day dedicated to giving thanks.

In our Gospel reading today, ten lepers were healed by Jesus. Only one came back to say “thank you.” All ten of them had cried out from a distance, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” These lepers were deferential while suffering excruciating agony. In their anguish they had even set aside the antagonism and bitterness known to exist between Jews and Samaritans, which was the makeup of their group. But when they saw their leprosy cured, and felt sound and whole again, nine of them took their blessing for granted and forgot to simply say ‘thank you.’

How long does gratitude last? In today’s reading from Deuteronomy, Moses speaks to that very temptation to take things for granted when he warns the people of Israel, “When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt... Do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.” But remember the Lord your God, for it is [God] who gives you power to get wealth....”

Let’s face it—our gratitude can grow tepid and unenthusiastic, especially when things are going well and the wind is in our sails. We can become distracted by our good fortune. And if we are really honest— our gratitude can grow ice cold, Arctic cold, especially in situations when it feels as if so much has been stripped away from us. Again, when facing real challenges it can be difficult to generate gratitude.

In her 2012 book entitled “Help Thanks Wow: Three Essential Prayers” author Anne Lamott asserts that these prayers – help, asking for assistance from God; thanks, appreciating what we have; and wow, feeling awe at the world around us— can get us through tough times, difficult days, and the hardships of daily life, as well as show us the way forward.

The simple one-word prayer of “thanks”— entails offering thanksgiving in the face of great rejoicing, and also giving thanks even in the face of great pain, when life becomes exhausting and when nothing makes sense. We can do this because it is through these broken places—the limitations, the weariness, the difficult times and challenges— where light can illuminate what we inevitably take for granted: the very things that most merit our gratitude.

Lamott puts it this way—she writes, “Sometimes —oh, just once in a blue moon—I resist being receptive to God's generosity, because I'm busy with a project and trying to manipulate Him or Her into helping me with it, or with getting my toys fixed or any major discomfort to pass. But God is not a banker or a bean counter. God gives us even more, which is so subversive. God just gives, to us, to you and me. I mean, look at us! Yikes. But God keeps giving, forgiving, and inviting us back.”<sup>i</sup>

That one healed soul, no longer an outcast, accepted the invitation and came back to the one person who reached out in a way no one else would. Most everything that this person had counted on prior to contracting leprosy had been stripped away —community, togetherness, fellowship, similar to what we are experiencing during this pandemic. As the disease of leprosy progressed, he had to let go of what was— just as we have had to let go of our usual way of life as COVID advances. And because God never ceases to invite us back over and over as Lamott writes, this healed soul returned to give gratitude for what had always been there all along—God's love. We have been given a similar opportunity to turn and grasp onto what has become even more precious and cherished in this time of social distancing: the gift of God's love through deepened connections to the people in our lives who have been here all along.

The Gospel story of the ten lepers may serve as a lesson about giving thanks where thanks is due, but it is more than that. It shows us the power of the divine invitation, that summons us to return again and again and be transformed through the act of gratitude.

What is the ultimate focus of our thanks? The healing or Jesus the healer? The gift or Jesus the giver? The blessing or Jesus the blessing? At this moment we may not feel as if healing, gifts, or blessings are in abundance in the midst of our present situation, individually or as a nation. But just like that one healed soul, who before doing anything else returned to the source, as Christians, our secure, tried-and-true landing place to return to, can always be Jesus, whether we are in our joy or in our sorrow, and everything in-between.

Now, Jesus didn't *need* any of the ten to come back and say “thank you”; meaning, his power, healing, compassion and love were never diminished in any way by the actions of the nine who did not return. But we need to give thanks because the act of thanksgiving changes and transforms *us*. We often think that we must first be delighted before we can generate gratitude. But I'm sorry—that's just hogwash. (And, just so you know, I would have used more strident terminology, but you know, I'm in church!)

Real gratitude is marked by more than just the social niceties of ‘please’ and ‘thank you.’ Real gratitude is a holy remedy— a means of redress and repair. Engaging in it is a way to start rebuilding from the ashes. Availing yourself to it enables you to approach and confront hardship with the boldness of faith. For what did Jesus say to the healed one who returned and offered thanksgiving? “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” Faith mixed with gratitude is a divine elixir. When life demands more, and still even more of us, gratitude with faith lets us know that we have— and are— enough. Gratitude, it turns out, unlocks the richness and fullness of life.

Rabbi Harold Kushner once wrote, “Can you see the holiness in those things you take for granted—a paved road or a washing machine? If you concentrate on finding what is good in every situation, you will discover that your life will suddenly be filled with gratitude, a feeling that nurtures the soul.”<sup>ii</sup>

We all need some soul-nurturing right about now. Expressing gratitude in the middle of difficult circumstances bewilders us, since it disrupts our usual narrative regarding the context in which we believe gratitude should be expressed. But, let us not be so strict and inflexible in our interpretation. As Lamott writes, “Astonishing material and revelation appear in our lives all the time. Let it be. Unto us, so much is given. We just have to be open for business.”<sup>iii</sup>

So, the question for us on this Thanksgiving Day is: will we remain open for the business of God to take place within us— the business of a God who “keeps giving, forgiving, and inviting us back”; a God who continually permeates our gratitude—that holy remedy— with new possibility, and ordains new life to emerge from the very seeds of thanksgiving that we are invited to plant? I believe that we will.

A blessed and safe Thanksgiving to you all. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*, Riverhead Books, New York, 2012.

<sup>ii</sup> Rabbi Harold Kushner, *Handbook for the Soul*, ed. Richard Carlson and Benjamin Shield, Back Bay Books, New York, 1996.

<sup>iii</sup> Op cit., p.

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