

“Gratitude and Grace”

a sermon by

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Text: “Then Jesus said, ‘Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?’” (Luke 17: 17-18).

Two weeks ago I attended the annual meeting of the Charlotte Council of Foreign Affairs that honored Graham Allison, a Charlotte native, who heads the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. The other honoree of the evening was a former U.S. Senator, Sam Nunn, of Georgia. In his remarks Graham Allison acknowledged his praise of Senator Nunn, who along with Senator Dick Lugar, sponsored legislation after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, to locate and protect the thousands of nuclear weapons located in the republics of the former Soviet Union. The legislation that was passed did a great deal to insure that thousands of unguarded nuclear weapons in the former Soviet Republic would not fall into the hands of terrorist organizations.

I.

There is a remarkable story in Luke’s gospel that deals with the subject of “gratitude and grace.” Luke tells us that Jesus, when he was on his way from Galilee to Jerusalem, encountered ten lepers who were standing by the road. By law, people with this disease had to separate themselves from other people. Often, they lived in leper colonies, and if anyone approached them, they were required to call out, “Unclean, Unclean.” So, when they saw Jesus, they called to him from a distance, saying, “Master, have mercy on us.” Jesus replied by saying, “Go and show yourselves to a priest,” which they did. On the way to the priest they were healed.

Luke continues the story by saying that after the ten lepers realized that they had been healed, only one of them returned to Jesus to give thanks, and this man was not a Jew; he was a Samaritan.

At that point Jesus asks three decisive questions: 1) “Were not ten cleansed?” 2) “Where are the nine?” 3) Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”

Thus we confront the issue of gratitude and ingratitude.

II.

This healing story, however, does raise some troubling questions. Did not the ten lepers do what Jesus commanded? He told them to go to a priest, and that is exactly what they did. They obeyed his command.

And why would Jesus say to the Samaritan that his faith had made him well (vs. 17)? All ten were made well. In reality, there are really two stories here. The first one (verses 11-14) is a simple miracle story that tells of the healing of ten lepers. The second story (vs. 15-19) is the story of the salvation of a Samaritan. Ten lepers were healed. One Samaritan experienced salvation. Jesus commended this man for his gratitude.

We don’t know why the nine did not return to give thanks. Did they see their healing as a kind of entitlement? After all, they had suffered a great deal. Why should they not be healed? They were loyal Jews. Surely of all people they deserved some of God’s benefits.

III.

There is, after all, something very powerful about gratitude. One of the questions that troubled the Protestant Reformers of the Sixteenth Century was the relationship between “faith” and “works.” The medieval church had taught that “works” was the means to salvation. The system of indulgences that was practiced in the church allowed people to purchase forgiveness and to store up treasures for themselves.

Martin Luther, on the other hand, saw that there was something tragically wrong in this system. Salvation, he was convinced, was not something we earned. It was something given to us. Luther found this witness in the Old and New Testament alike. “The just shall live by faith.” Salvation, Luther insisted, is not something we do. It is something that is done for us in Christ’s death. We can receive it by faith but we cannot earn it.

There is nothing more powerful than this understanding of grace and God’s giving of himself to us. Some years ago I came across a book by Ernest Gordon entitled *To End All Wars*. It was the autobiographical account of Gordon’s experience as a British Army Officer captured by the Japanese during World War II and assigned to the building of the Burma Siam railway. Each day Gordon joined a work detail of prisoners to build a track bed through low-lying swampland. If a prisoner appeared to lag, a Japanese guard would beat him to death or decapitate him. Many more men simply dropped dead from exhaustion, malnutrition, and disease. Ultimately, 80,000 prisoners died.

Gordon could feel himself wasting away from the combination of beriberi, worms, malaria, dysentery, typhoid and diphtheria. Paralyzed and unable to eat, he asked to be laid in the Death House. His friends refused to allow this.

Then, Gordon writes, something happened in that prison camp that Gordon later called "Miracle on the River Kwai." One day a Japanese guard discovered that a shovel was missing. When no one confessed to the theft, he screamed, "All die! All die!" He raised his rifle to fire at the first man in the line. At that instant an enlisted man stepped forward and said, "I did it."

Enraged, the guard lifted his weapon high in the air and brought the butt of the weapon on the soldier's skull, killing him instantly. That evening, when the tools were inventoried again, the work crew discovered a mistake. No shovel was missing.

One of the prisoners remembered the verse in the New Testament, "Greater love hath no man than he lay down his life for his friends."

Gordon said from that day on life in the camp changed. Food that had once been hoarded was freely shared. Prisoners cared for one another. When the allied soldiers finally liberated the camp, the prisoners treated their sadistic guards with kindness and not revenge.

Gordon's own life took an unexpected turn. After the war, he enrolled in seminary and became a Presbyterian minister, ending up as Dean of the Chapel at Princeton University, where he died in early 2002, just before the movie about his life was completed.

That is the power of gratitude. One person was willing to give his life that others might be spared. That is gratitude and it is one of the most powerful forces one can imagine.

IV.

There is something else significant about gratitude and it is the fact that gratitude forms the basis of the Christian life. John Calvin once called the Christian life the result of our acknowledgement of what God has done for us in Christ.

One of the most perplexing questions on college campuses today is the question of how students are to deal with people of other faiths. Will Willimon, who for a number of years was the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, once told of a young student who came to see him. It seems like this young student and his roommate were not getting along. When Willimon asked him why, the student replied, "Because he is a Muslim and I am a Christian." When Willimon asked him why this was so disruptive, the student said that his roommate was always asking him questions about his religion. He had tried to explain to his Muslim roommate that he was a Christian, but that he and his family really didn't go to church very much.

On one occasion this Muslim asked his roommate why Christians did not pray. He answered by saying that he did pray, but that many Christians were very private in their prayers. "I'll say you are," replied the Muslim, who prayed five times a day facing toward Mecca.

The final straw apparently happened after a long party weekend when this student came to his room in the early hours of the morning and the Muslim said to him, "Doesn't your St. Paul say something about not joining your body with a prostitute?" I told him, "Look, she is not a prostitute! She is a Tri Delt." Then this student told his roommate, "I told you I am not the best Christian in the world. You shouldn't judge the Christian faith by me." At this point the young Muslim said somewhat sadly, "Then how should I judge the Christian faith?"

You see, that is one of the hard parts of our faith. Jesus said, "You shall judge a tree by its fruit." Most of us don't want to be responsible for our religious faith. But people judge our faith by what they see in us.

V.

There is something else in this healing story. We have spoken about the indifference of the nine, but what about the gratitude of the one. If the apathy of the nine bothered Jesus, then surely the devotion of the Samaritan must have encouraged him.

Throughout the New Testament we see that Jesus often sought the aid and comfort of friends. He chose twelve men to be his disciples. Why? "That they might be with him," say the evangelists. Time and time again he went to the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus because they were his friends. In Gethsemane he asked Peter, James and John to stay with him for just an hour. When the weight of his cross overwhelmed him on the way to Calvary, there was a man by the name of Simon of Cyrene, who reached out to help him. And on the cross there was a dying thief who said to him, "Lord, remember me, when you come into your kingdom."

All of these people—the dying thief, the Cyrenian, the family at Bethany, the blundering disciples and this nameless leper were part of a group of people who were God's reinforcing messengers to Jesus.

We talk in church about what Jesus has done for us, but what about what we are called to do for Jesus?

Dr. Theodore Ferris once told of a traveler in Africa watching a nun dressing the wounds of a leper in one of the large leper colonies on that continent. The wounds were revolting, gruesome, and repulsive. As this man watched her work he said under his breath, "I wouldn't do that for a million dollars." The nun, who overheard him, replied, "I wouldn't do it for a million dollars either." She wasn't doing it for money. She was doing it out of love. She was doing it because Jesus said, "Inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me."

This morning we are celebrating the successful completion of a Stewardship Campaign, as we prepare ourselves for the year 2007. On Thursday we will gather in our churches and homes to give thanks to God for the bounty and freedom that we enjoy in this city and nation.

Surely that gratitude is the occasion for all of us to acknowledge in our lives the incredible debt we owe to so many people, and to pledge our lives into dedicated service for the sake of those who need our help and for the love of Christ our Savior.

Amen!