

## “MAKING SPACE FOR GRATITUDE”

Psalm 136:1-9, 23-26; Luke 17:11-19

November 17, 2019

Rev. Jerry Duggins

“It is not the office of a man to receive gifts. How dare you give them? We wish to be self-sustained. We do not quite forgive a giver.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson.

I came across this quote in Diana Butler Bass’s book, *Grateful*. She was discussing the literature claiming that gratitude had become “feminized” in western culture at some point. Recent studies have shown that men find expressing gratitude more difficult than women. Based on their own reports, according to Bass, “a distaste for indebtedness and a preference for independence... act as stumbling blocks to gratitude” (p. 16).

In the days when Jesus walked the earth, the business and political world was run largely by men. When they gave gifts, it was to lay an obligation on the recipient to return something by way of a favor that would advance the giver’s position in the world. Historians refer to this as the patronage system. We’re perhaps more familiar with the term “quid pro quo” these days. It’s everyday stuff in the relationships between nations, corporations and business associates. The practice stands at the center of the lobby system and political contributions that make it difficult for legislators to act with integrity.

Most people do not have the capital to even get into this game. And so we despair about the world, about government, and about the possibility for systemic change. It’s not so bad relying on other people. We actually have no choice about that. We need others: farmers to grow our food, the medical industry to treat our illnesses, businesses to provide us with jobs. What’s really hard is knowing that we have to rely on the generosity of others. We despair because we don’t believe the world ever gives something for nothing.

And yet most people will say that they have had recent experiences for which they are grateful. We experience gratitude in our personal lives, but remain suspicious of institutions and government. Bass calls this the “gratitude gap.” She writes: “We recognize gifts and are grateful on an ad hoc basis, but the world in which we live is surely not shaped by such thankfulness. No, we live in a toxic habitat of ingratitude” (p. xix). While we, ourselves, are grateful, we fail to see gratitude as a governing principal in the world.

Ten lepers were healed. Only one returns. Jesus seems surprised, but we aren’t. As individuals, we know gratitude. The other nine, well, they reflect what we expect from the world. Maybe, we don’t even blame them. As lepers, they’ve been isolated from the world. There’s no time to be wasted on giving thanks. Get to the priest. Get that clean bill of health and get back in the game. Maybe we’re surprised that even one returns.

Why does he come back anyway? I think, it’s because he recognized the gift. The healing was not just what one Jew does for another. He was a Samaritan, an unacceptable Jew. He knew Jesus was for the outsider, that the gospel was based on gift, not on obligation. Maybe the others were Jews and expected that Jesus would do this for one of his own. As one of the chosen, they deserved this.

Maybe they were Samaritans too. Maybe they just thought that good health was their due, that it was owed them, that they had somehow earned this healing. We do that all the time. We talk about how hard we worked for this education, for the job, for the promotion, for the victory.

Ten were healed. One returned to give thanks. Ten were healed. Only one was made whole. Only one discovered faith. Only one recognized the gift. Only one was fundamentally changed. Gratitude did that. Gratitude elicited praise. He didn't come back because he felt he owed Jesus something. He came back because he was grateful. And he was grateful because he saw his healing as a gift, unmerited, no strings attached gift. No quid pro quo. Jesus tells him to go on his way. He is free. He is whole. He owes nothing.

Bass says, "the right gift at the right time can change us" (p.7). Our welfare and the health of the world depend on gifts. Jesus comes as a gift. John says, "as many as received him" were given power to become children of God. "Grace begets gratitude," writes Bass, "Thankfulness is a feeling in response to gifts" (p.19).

"We do not really give gifts. We recognize gifts, we receive them, and we pass them on. We all rely on these gifts. We all share them" (p.21). She calls this "the gift structure of the universe." I love this phrase. It reminds me that we are always getting something for nothing: the air we breathe, the soil and the rain that grows our food. We received nourishment in the womb. As children, we did not earn the food on our tables. The medical treatment that has mended our bones and healed our diseases was gifted to us through the efforts of a long history of men and women devoted to caring for the body. In a recent study, neuroscientists have concluded that "the regular practice of gratitude... is facet of the human condition that reaps true benefits to those who mean it" [Dailyhealthpost.com].

Gratitude has changed us. It lies at the core of our faith. Grace and gratitude come from the same word. Karl Barth said, "Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice an echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder lightning" (p.3).

We experience this in the community of faith where we make a habit of giving thanks, recognizing the gifts that come to us from God. We can all cite experiences where gratitude has made all the difference. Gratitude makes us whole. And it is precisely what our world needs. Maybe gratitude could undo the gridlock in congress. Maybe gratitude could inspire us to take better care of the planet, to work harder at feeding the hungry, or welcome the stranger.

We need to make space for gratitude for our future, whether we're talking about our personal futures, the future of the church or the future of the world. Life, health, and wholeness depends on it. But we'll need to get our egos out of the way, give up independence and move toward mutuality, say no to our achievement-oriented society, and recognize the gifts that make up the very structure of the universe. This is not naïve nor impossible. It's what our faith is all about. It's what we mean when we say, "God is good... all the time." Amen.

Resource:

Diana Butler Bass. *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*. Harper One: New York NY, 2018.