

## RADICAL GRATITUDE

-*St Andy's, Sudbury; October 4, 2009 (Thanksgiving)*-  
Luke 17:11-19

A few moments ago, the children talked about “the magic word.”  
And we were all reminded  
    that there really is no magic word.  
There is no formula that will grant us all our wishes.  
Saying “Please” is only a beginning piece of the big picture of civility,  
    and we teach Please to our children  
    to introduce them to the niceties of social interaction.  
It’s an easy word to integrate into a child’s early vocabulary  
    because there’s generally some sort of reward involved:  
a child quickly learns that there’s a very clear advantage to being polite!

But there are further lessons in civility to be learned—  
    lessons that teach a young human being  
    to move beyond the self-centredness  
    that focuses only on the gift in the outstretched hand.  
Saying “Thank you” takes us a step further.  
    It requires an increased level of maturity.  
It has to do not only with receiving, but with giving and returning—  
    the giving of gratitude, the returning of thanks.  
There’s a whole different kind of magic that happens  
    when we say Thank You,  
    a magic that goes far beyond getting us what we think we want.  
Saying Please connects us with the gift.  
Saying Thank You connects us with the giver of the gift.

Here’s how it might happen....

Jesus is just entering the village,  
    but it appears that his reputation has preceded him—  
    a group of ragged figures is clustered on the bakery corner,  
    waiting to hail Jesus as he starts walking down Main Street.  
They won’t get too close to Jesus, this motley crew of ten.  
    They aren’t allowed to, by law.  
    Because they’re lepers.

Time alone will tell whether each leper’s particular skin ailment is curable.

People use the word *leprosy*  
to describe a whole assortment of ulcerous skin conditions.  
Once in a while, a “leper” actually gets better.

But most don't.

Most suffer a slow and lingering death,  
their anguish deepened by the fact that they are deemed unclean.  
Untouchable.  
Tainted by evil, somehow.

The law forbids lepers to touch anyone who is not also a leper.  
They can't even be in proximity.

Tormented by memories of walking up to the bakery ovens  
and hefting a warm loaf of bread with clean, healthy fingers,  
pressing a coin into the baker's hand,  
these ten lepers on the street corner ache for human contact.

To hug, to kiss, to cradle a baby,  
to gather around the family table,  
to rub shoulders or be jostled by the crowd,  
to simply wait in line beside a healthy person—  
all this is forbidden. Lost.

Compelled to live outside the town limits,  
thrown into forced exile together—Jews and Samaritans—  
human outcasts,  
these ten are bound only to each other,  
and bound thus by their excruciating need and their common misery.

Oh, they know what they want, these lepers!  
They've heard about this Jesus from Nazareth.  
They've heard whispers of blind people seeing,  
of lame people walking, and, yes, even of dead people  
clambering off their funeral biers!  
They've heard enough to chance a trip into town.

It's never easy coming into town.  
As always, the lepers are the only ones on their side of the street.  
People have heard them coming  
long before there's any danger of accidental contact.  
Ten people yelling at the top of their lungs “Unclean! Unclean!”  
from half a kilometer away is plenty of warning,  
plenty of time to move out of the way.

Today the crowds are especially annoyed with the lepers,  
it's obvious from the furtive scowls glancing off the cluster of ten.  
Everyone wants to get close to Jesus when he arrives  
and the unclean ones are taking up half the street.

Jesus notices the lepers right away.

He's not blind.

Or deaf, for that matter.

The lepers keep their distance,

staying on their own little patch of town that they've laid claim to,  
but they're used to yelling in public and they do it now:

"Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

Oh yes, Jesus hears them.

And he doesn't hesitate for a second to give them what they're asking for.

There's no record of the lepers saying the magic word "Please,"  
but Jesus is not playing games of civility.

He sees their filthy bandages through eyes of compassion.

His heart of love pierces through their bravado and bluster  
and recognizes the stamp of rejection.

The lepers ask for mercy. Jesus gives them mercy.

From the middle of the dusty street, he yells back at them:

"Go and show yourselves to the priest!"

Show ourselves to the priest?!

The lepers fall silent and look at each other in wonderment.

Does he mean what I think he means?

The priests?

You think...?

Yes, all right, let's do it!

What do we have to lose?

Let's go to the priests, then—

the priests, who have authority to pronounce us unclean.

Or clean.

The priests, who have authority to exile us from our homes.

And the power to permit us back into the marketplace.

The priests, who decide when we must call ourselves lepers.

And who will decide what sacrifices we must offer when we are cured...

*when we are cured!!*

The lepers are already stumbling their way up the road, bandages flapping.  
People are gaping after them,  
    their curiosity almost—but not quite—propelling them in pursuit.  
The crowd hangs back, hesitant.  
Heads turn back to Jesus,  
    but Jesus is crouched down, busy now with some of the children....

Suddenly.

Suddenly there's a ruckus in the distance.

    From up the road, where the lepers have taken off.  
It's hard to see—there's such a haze with this heat—  
    but it looks as though....

    yes, there *is* someone coming back.  
Running back, at breakneck speed, and heading for the crowd.  
It's the Samaritan leper, the one with the weird headband,  
    whooping and hollering at the top of his lungs,  
    frantically tearing off his bandages.

Like the waters of the Red Sea,  
    the crowd miraculously parts to let him through.

Slowly, Jesus straightens himself up.

He doesn't seem particularly surprised,  
    but there's joy in his eyes and a huge grin spreads across his face  
    when he looks down at the Samaritan man  
    who flings himself to the ground at Jesus' feet,  
    almost knocking him over in his exuberance.

The Samaritan man who used to be a leper.  
The one who has come back to say Thank You.

We would, too, of course, have come back to say Thank You.

Wouldn't we?

Where would we fit into this story?

Would we have to number ourselves among the nine  
    who must surely have rejoiced in their healing on the way,  
    the nine who also received the gift of mercy  
and couldn't wait to get official permission to *live* again?

Would we have to number ourselves among the nine  
    who failed to realize  
    that coming back to say Thank You

would have given them the chance to *touch Jesus*?

Oh, how much more than a cure for leprosy this one man receives—  
this one who returns.

Like the others, he has reached out, asked for mercy,  
and somehow believed that Jesus could and would meet his need.  
But somewhere in the graces of that healing,  
this man realizes that he wants *more* than the gift he has asked for.

Being cleansed of his disease is not enough for him.

He is not satisfied with simply receiving—

he has a longing to do something in return, an urge to give back.

An urge we call gratitude.

And, because he responds to that urge,

because he gives in to his gratitude,

because he lets thankfulness overtake him—

this one experiences grace upon grace.

Of the ten, he is the one who knows what it is  
to come close to Jesus.

He gets to make contact with the holy, to reach out and touch him.

He is the one for whom the relationship with the Giver of the gift  
has become intensely personal.

It is simplistic, of course, to suggest  
that gratitude is defined merely by saying Thank You.

There is no magical power in those words.

Once we grow into adulthood,

we can see that the Samaritan man who was made whole

that day Jesus walked down Main Street

did not simply mouth a formula.

What he did do was stop short in the middle of the road

and think beyond the gift to the Giver of that gift.

Gratitude brought him to a place of contact with Jesus,

a place of relationship with the One in whom he encountered God.

And that is where gratitude can bring us too.

Gratitude can bring us into intimate relationship

with the Giver of every good and perfect gift.

For gratitude to do that, it has to be more than a feeling.

It has to be more than a few words strung together

that sound like Thank You.  
It is much more than just being thankful for the good things in life.  
If we look only to the gift,  
    we will run into problems.  
For one thing, life is too unpredictable, too rife with uncertainty,  
    too much beyond our control to offer any guarantees  
    of what we call the good things in life.  
We cannot shut out the noise of bombs exploding in the streets  
    or the rushing thunder of destructive winds and waves.  
Even as we celebrate the plenty on our Thanksgiving tables,  
    we are painfully aware that not everyone's plate is full.

We cannot be nonchalant about gratitude.  
Gratitude is not about polite thank-you notes  
    or the intricacies of social etiquette.  
It is not about thanking God that we are not in someone else's shoes.  
It is not about tallying up the things we have accumulated  
    that make life comfortable for us.  
It is not just a feeling of gratification.

Gratitude is a response.  
In the context of our Christian faith,  
    gratitude is our response to divine grace.  
And when it *is* that—our response to divine grace—  
    gratitude always connects us to God  
    and so it cannot fail to be transforming.

Gratitude for grace changes us forever—  
    as dramatically as the leper was changed in his healing—  
    it changes the way we live and the way we relate.  
Gratitude in the life of faith is a radical way of living.

We can't be sure what was in the hearts and minds  
    of those nine people who kept charging up the Palestine road,  
    away from Jesus.  
But we can be sure the one who came running back  
    clearly recognized that he had been touched by grace.  
That man was so full of gratitude he could hardly stand it!

When was the last time you were so thankful for being able to hug someone

that you could hardly stand it?  
Or when was the last time your heart was full to bursting  
because there was air for you to breathe?  
Water to drink?  
Sunshine on your face?  
How many times today have I stopped to thank God  
for the precious gift of life?  
For awareness?  
When will we next take the time to celebrate  
the amazing resurrection hope we have  
because of God's promise to us in the one we name Christ?  
How long until we learn to recognize the grace of God  
in *every* encounter with another human soul?  
The grace of God in every challenge of life, no matter how fearsome?

***God of the rainbow, God of the cross, God of the empty grave—  
How does the creature say Grace, how does the creature say Thanks?***

No, these are not polite little thank-you notes.

Gratitude is a radical attitude,

a way of living and breathing that refuses to take life for granted  
and, instead, stops smack in the middle of the road  
to take a good long look at grace.

Radical gratitude means letting the thank-yous build up in us  
until they burst out

and we can't stop from running back to the One who blesses us.

Radical gratitude is our unmeasured response  
to God's measureless goodness.

Thank you, God.