



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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"The Antidote of Gratitude"

*Sermon preached at the six o'clock pm service, November 25, 2015
Thanksgiving Eve—Based on Luke 17: 11-19*

The event could have happened in any city or town: A group of people seeking healing and wholeness.

- + An AA meeting here at St. Bart's Church;
- + A business executive attempting to mask depression during his/her third cocktail;
- + A group of teenagers seeking belonging;
- + Several lonely homemakers and apartment dwellers seeking friendship during lunch;
- + An Alzheimer's patient trying to find her way to the dining room of the nursing home;
- + Residents of an HIV/AIDS house trying to find the right cocktail of medicines.

In our Gospel text, Luke tells us about ten desperate lepers who were seeking a new life. They had the most dreaded disease of the ancient world. Leprosy was painful, disfiguring, disgusting and frequently fatal. It was a disease that made people outcasts; they had to wear bells around their necks and shout, "Unclean" wherever they went outside the leper colony.

Luke tells of ten lepers who met up with Jesus one day in a dry and dusty Samaritan village. He tells us the detail that, although 10 were cleansed of their leprosy, sadly only one was made whole.

None of us has leprosy; but few, if any of us, are not in need of healing and wholeness in some aspect of our lives. In fact, I don't know anyone who is completely whole, totally well!

Our Gospel text is a little vignette of our search for this healing and wholeness. The essential key ingredient or antidote to a life of dis-ease and states of illness of one kind or another is found at the end of the story: Luke tells us that "ten were cleansed, but only one was healed." Ten got over their Leprosy, but only one was made whole.

Why? Because only one turned back "praising God with a loud voice, and falling on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks."

That's the final and decisive act of discovering healing and wholeness: Deep and abiding gratitude.

Every week at St. Bart's Church we sing the traditional Doxology. As the ushers bring our offerings to the front of the church, the organ swells and we stand and with gusto sing, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow, praise God, all creatures here below, praise God above, ye heavenly hosts, praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost." As the Celebrant behind the altar, I get to watch you as you sing this great hymn. Sometimes I wonder what you and I are thinking while we sing, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow."

Do we really believe that all blessings flow from God? Aren't some of us thinking at least some of the time, "I worked hard for this money, and while I'm glad to be giving some of it away, it's really mine, and of my own good intentions and motives, I'm releasing some of it, entrusting it to the good work of St. Bart's."

In the midst of this whole dynamic is a choice: Either we believe that life is something to be achieved or we believe life is something that can only be received. Once we name this choice, we can then see this throughout the Bible: Is God the Creator or are we? Is Jesus the savior or are we? Does the Holy Spirit provide wisdom and guidance, or are we the wisdom source and the guide and governance of our lives?

Whether we admit it or not, we are making choices every day based on this paradox.

Listen: If achievement and possessiveness become our goals, our companions will be complaint, anxiety and fear, because we'll never achieve and possess enough. If, on the other hand, receiving and giving become our goals, our companions will be gratitude and joy, because there is no end to the blessings God is giving us and there is no end to our giving to God's children.

Several years ago right around Thanksgiving the newspaper carried a remarkable story about a husband and wife who boarded an airplane in New York City on their way to Disney World in Orlando. As the plane climbed to 30,000 feet the woman, who was about seven and one-half months pregnant, went into labor. By some miracle, there was a physician on board who helped the woman get comfortable. He tried to assure her saying, "Don't worry, it's probably just false labor." But the woman's labor pains grew more intense until they all began to realize that she was going to have her baby right there in Row 28! The pilot radioed Air Traffic Control and asked to make an emergency landing at the nearest major airport, which just happened to be Washington Dulles Airport. But as the plane began its descent, the baby decided to arrive and came into the world just as the wheels touched down. When the flight attendant came on the loud speaker and announced, "It's a boy!" the cabin erupted in cheers and applause. They wrapped the baby in blankets, used a shoelace to tie off the umbilical cord, and then whisked the baby and his parents off to a hospital.

On the ground, the new parents were faced with another challenge: What to name their new son? They were thinking about something silly like 737 or United, but in the end they gave him the name of Matthew Dulles — Matthew, a Hebrew name that literally means "gift of God," and, of course, Dulles, the name of the place of his birth.

St. Augustine said that if we move through each day and don't say "wow" at least four times, we are not aware of God's incredible blessings.

So, we learn in our gospel text that 10 lepers were cleansed, but only one was truly healed—the one who turned back to God with praise and thanksgiving. May we be that person this holiday season!