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Be grateful. Be healed.  
Martin Grove United Church  
October 13, 2019  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 14:13-21 and Luke 17:11-19

Happy Thanksgiving! Thanksgiving feels like such a simple celebration. Stick a turkey in the oven, and give thanks. Nice and simple, at least if you are not a turkey. But in fact, I think that giving thanks - even though it seems simple enough - isn't such a natural thing to do. Consider our Bible readings today. 5000 people were fed, and 10 lepers were healed, and of those 5010 people (plus women and children), only 1 person expressed gratitude. Does that sound about right to you?

Actually, I myself live in a world that contains frequent expressions of gratitude. In my experience the odds of someone expressing gratitude are much better than 5010:1. Sometimes the expressions of gratitude come out of my own mouth of course. Beyond the obvious of thanking store clerks, I can't get on a bus without thanking the driver. When I participated in the Friday Climate Strike at Queen's Park recently I went out of my way to thank the security and police for their help creating a safe environment. I regularly thank many people in this church - although too subtly for some of you. At funerals I thank people for attending. At internments I always thank the workers who do so much to help families behind the scenes. Even when I keep my mouth closed, I notice lots of expressions of gratitude. And that's perhaps the first secret about gratitude - we see more of it when we pay attention.

But in our society, what does the expression "thank you" mean anyway? Is it just an expression that we use thoughtlessly that carries no real meaning, like "have a nice day", or "nice shirt", or "you look good - have you lost weight"? Is it like the magic word - "please" - that means absolutely nothing except that we agree to the social contract that we are expected to use the word? What does gratitude mean anyway?

I think I know where part of the confusion comes from. And here's the good news - we can all blame our parents for this. We were raised to think that saying "thank you" is something we do for the benefit of the other person, the person being thanked. Well,

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that's true to a certain extent. When we ourselves are thanked for doing something, that always feels good, doesn't it? But science has proven that saying "thank you" affects the speaker far more than it affects the listener.

Science - OK, The Internet, and that's a close second - says that expressing gratitude gives the speaker many benefits, including: more patience, improved relationships, better sleep, an easing of symptoms of depression, and happiness that lasts.<sup>1</sup> Wow. Happiness. How did that get in there? Isn't happiness the one thing that all people really want? How can gratitude possibly lead to happiness?

Besides, as we all know, happiness comes from a store, right? Happiness comes from comparing my life to your life and deciding that I won. Happiness comes when my phone is cooler than your phone - and by the way, it is! Happiness comes from the accumulation of stuff, doesn't it? And when I get enough cool stuff then I'll be happy. The only people who think there is another source of happiness are poor people, right? We all know that gratitude comes from having stuff, and I'll be grateful - after I get my electric car. But by then I'll probably need a new computer too, and by the time I replace my computer I'll probably need a new phone. But THEN I'll be happy and I promise you, I will be grateful. For at least a week. I promise!

Sorry about that. Somehow I channeled into the spirit of consumerism for a moment. But it's only natural. It's natural for all of us. Here - let's do an experiment. [do hand clap experiment: clap on 3]

See. as human we listen much more to how others live their lives than we listen to what they say. Our desire to fit in is very strong. And we think that fitting in will lead to happiness. And "fitting in" in a consumer culture means wanting stuff. Please congratulate yourself for being normal.

But in our reading from Luke today Jesus reminds us that expressing gratitude is actually part of the healing that we all need. The leper who was healed wasn't quite finished his healing until he thanked Jesus. I saw that played out this week actually. Twice.

The first time was at the healing circles for grieving that I'm leading at the

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1cML8ejWm\\_o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1cML8ejWm_o).

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Rexdale Community Health Centre. Some of the people in the group are recent refugees, and they have stunning stories of deep loss, and also amazing stories of gratitude as well. That group has taught me a lot about the relationship between loss, gratitude, and healing.

And then I saw the same theme played out on Netflix. I watched an episode of a series called, “Tidying up with Marie Kondo”. It’s a show about a person, Marie, who goes around helping people tidy up their homes. I’m sure you can understand that I could only take 1 episode of that! But I watched an episode where a widow of 9 months was struggling to clean out her husband’s effects, particularly his clothes. The widow was struggling to live in her messy house but at the same time was struggling to throw away any of her husband’s clothes. The widow wanted a clean house, but what she really needed was healing. And Marie’s plan was to encourage the widow to select items to discard, but to take time to thank each item individually. To remember the joy that was connected to each piece of clothing, and to thank the piece of clothing for being a spark of joy, and then to let it go. That simple act connected gratitude to grief, to healing and to happiness. And it worked. Expressing gratitude lead to the healing that the widow needed.

If you prefer a more spiritual example - although to me nothing is more spiritual than healing - consider the wisdom of Brother David Steinel-Rast<sup>2</sup>, a Catholic Benedictine monk. He questions the idea that happiness leads to gratitude anyway. He invites us to think of the people we know who have all the ingredients we think are required for happiness, and yet are bitter and unhappy people. And think of the people you know who have serious life challenges, and yet are the personification of gratitude and seem to enjoy a good deal of happiness. The simple truth - and our story of Jesus healing the 10 lepers is an example of this - is that gratitude leads to happiness, not the other way around.

Grateful living is when we accept the simple truth that each moment is a gift. Think about this moment - right now. You didn’t earn it. You don’t deserve it. It is a gift given to you. Each moment is a gift. Do we have the capacity to recognize and to be grateful for that gift? Do you believe that opportunity only knocks once, and if you miss

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UtBsl3j0YRQ>

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it it's gone? Well, perhaps that one opportunity is gone forever. But every moment there is another opportunity, and you are free to avail yourself of that moment, of that opportunity. And that one. And that one. It's never too late to start being grateful because you can start right now.

Brother David summarizes his teachings about gratitude in a simple way I would like to share. Remember when we were children and we were told how to cross a street. We were told to stop, look, and then go. Brother David's advice for grateful living uses the same 3 steps.

First, stop. We can't reflect on our lives if we are running around like chickens all the time. Make intentional time for yourself. Pause. Relax. Breathe.

Then, look. Look into your own heart. Reflect on your life. Relish the gifts you have received. Look at the new opportunities for gratitude all around you even now. Realize that you are loved. You are blessed. You are a gift.

Finally, go. Feeling grateful is great-ful. But gratitude also needs to be expressed. We need to act. We need to actually do something to express our gratitude. Each of us can decide if that means you need to verbally express gratitude, or you need to write a note, or perhaps you just to move yourself to a space where you can more fully experience gratitude. Perhaps you want to act out your gratitude in service to others. In any case, gratitude involves action. And don't forget to be grateful to yourself at least some of the time.

Stop. Look. Then express your gratitude in action.

Not only does happiness NOT come from a store, it is generally not something that you can find anyway. Happiness is something that each of us creates for ourselves. And the simplest way to create it is to express gratitude to others. Gratitude is like the mental health equivalent of a green smoothie. And just like that smoothie, it doesn't do much good for you while it sits in the glass. You need to drink it. You need to act.

The holiday today is called "Thanksgiving", not "Thanksbeing". It's not enough to be grateful. We need to act on it. Express your gratitude, and you will find your healing.

*Amen.*