“Gratitude or Ingratitude?”
Sermon on Sunday, October 9, 2016
Based on Luke 17:11-19

Is today’s gospel lesson about gratitude or ingratitude? While this question remains in the eye of the beholder, I would suggest that it is about both - the incredible capacity of human beings to forget their benefactors by taking things for granted - and the amazing positive influence of practiced gratitude. There are examples for both in our own lives and experiences - times when our acts were met with gratitude; times when they were received with indifference; times when we failed to acknowledge a gift; times when we felt deeply grateful for someone else helping us.

When I was growing up my little sister broke her jaw several times. She had been sliding down the railing of our stairways – I have to say we all did this against our parents’ multiple warnings. She fell off and landed awkwardly on her face on the hard stone steps. She was rushed to a hospital, had her jaw set, her mouth wired shut and could only take in liquid food for several months. Eight of nine years old at the time, she also had to be brought back to the hospital frequently. The hospital ride was pretty far and my parents didn’t own a car. So they relied on the kindness of someone – not a relative, no one really close to the family - who lent us his car, no questions asked. It was a very big deal and it was never forgotten. It was one of those instances where we relied on the kindness of another person.

Now, there are various degrees of gratitude and ingratitude. The degree depends partly on the magnitude of the gift and partly on where it’s coming from. A forgotten thank you note for a small birthday gift may not be such a big deal. It happens. But in other instances, ingratitude seems almost like a crime against humanity. The story of the ten lepers is an extreme case of ingratitude. After all, leprosy was a dreadful disease that relegated people to live in ghettos apart from their families. It caused foul odor, low life expectancy and dependency for the rest of one’s life. Yet, shockingly, when ten lepers were healed by Jesus, only one returned to give thanks according to this story. It’s hard to believe that, isn’t it? Only one? Really? And with Jesus we ask: where are the other nine? Did they think they were healed by chance? Or is our Lord exaggerating the extent of these men’s lack of appreciation a little bit in order to make his point? Perhaps, but let us remember: cases of radical ingratitude have been reported elsewhere.

For instance, famous defense lawyer Samuel Leibowitz of New York – he died in 1978 – represented 78 persons charged with first degree murder, people who could have been handed the death penalty if convicted. Leibowitz was probably the best defense lawyer of his era. He was known for his meticulous preparation, knowledge of the law, vibrant voice and flamboyant style. He later became a judge. His remarkable record as a defense lawyer resulted in 77 acquittals, one hung jury and no guilty verdicts. Someone remarked that Leibowitz saved 78 men from the electric chair but was never thanked once. I was not able to verify that statement, but if it is true, it would be pretty incredible, wouldn’t it?
Andrew Carnegie, the American tycoon and steel baron left $365 million to public charities. This was a lot more money at the time than what it is today. One of his relatives was deeply upset and cursed him thoroughly because he had left him only one measly million, which again was a lot more money in those days than what it is today.

Ungratefulness is a disease of the human soul. Like all spiritual diseases, like all forms of sin, it hurts not only other people but first and foremost those who are afflicted by it. In the gospel story Jesus reveals a surprising assessment: only one of the ten who got rid of this terrible skin disease completed his healing - the Samaritan man who came back to thank him. To this man Jesus said, “Get up and go on your way. Your faith has made you well.” The gospels always take a holistic perspective on healing: it’s not just about your body, it is also about your inner being, your soul. Only this man, Jesus said, had become truly well.

One of my favorite books during the Sabbatical was a meditation on the Apostle’s Creed by Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk. As I learned more about this author and his work in interreligious dialogue, I found that he has also written extensively about gratefulness and the importance of cultivating gratefulness as a way of life. On his website, gratefulness.org, he writes:

“Grateful living is a way of life which asks us to notice all that is already present and abundant – from the tiniest things of beauty to the grandest of our blessings – and in so doing, to take nothing for granted. We can learn to focus our attention on, and acknowledge, that life is a gift. Even in the most challenging times, living gratefully makes us aware of, and available to, the opportunities that are always available; opportunities to learn and grow, and to extend ourselves with care and compassion to others. Grateful living is based in, and reinforces, values such as respect, responsibility, and generosity. Small, grateful acts every day can uplift us, make a difference for others, and help change the world.”

I find that this sense of gratefulness, which extends far beyond a particular gift or a kindness we receive, but permeates our general outlook on life, is often found among people whose lives were afflicted and threatened by sickness, tragedy or something else. They are the kinds of people who tend to see and acknowledge in more depth the amazing gifts we are given every day.

Then there is the occasional moment of gratitude induced by someone else’s misery. Sometimes you look around and you see for instance the carnage of Hurricane Matthew in Haiti and in the southern US and you feel bad and also grateful to live in a less storm prone part of the country. But I suggest what we all need to cultivate is not the kind of gratefulness that compares our situation with that of others, but rather one that finds and celebrates the positives no matter what and that is willing to give back and to thank in words or in deeds, not only when we feel guilty or pressured. If ingratitude is a disease of the soul than gratitude can be called the soul’s health indicator. For today, let us give thanks in our hearts and souls, in our thoughts and prayers, through our willingness to help and serve others. Amen.