

“Return to the Source of Goodness”
November 21, 2021

Deuteronomy 8:7-18
Luke 17:11-19

At eighty years old and dying from cancer, the neurologist Oliver Sacks wrote four essays collected into a book with the simple title, *Gratitude*. Sacks was not a religious person.

And certainly, he had regrets, we all do. He wrote: “I am sorry I have wasted (and still waste) so much time; I am sorry to be as agonizingly shy at eighty as I was at twenty; I am sorry that I speak no languages other than my mother tongue and that I have not traveled or experienced other cultures as widely as I should have done.”¹

You might have similar regrets—or other ones.

But, mostly, Sacks was grateful. “My predominant feeling,” he wrote, “is one of gratitude. I am grateful that I have experienced many things—some wonderful, some horrible...I have loved and been loved; I have been given much and I have given something in return; I have read and traveled and thought and written...Above all, I have been a sentient being, a thinking animal, on this beautiful planet, and that in itself has been an enormous privilege and adventure.”²

What is thanksgiving but an acknowledgement that there is a Giver that calls forth our gratitude?

For some, that Giver might be the simple but inexplicable fact that there is something rather than nothing; that there is more matter than antimatter so that this vast universe did not self-destruct almost as soon as it came in being; that after billions of years and an infinity of space, we are here to enjoy these brief years on this beautiful planet. All of that is reason enough to give thanks, to rejoice and be glad in this day.

For some, the source of gratitude goes back to parents or grandparents or long-ago ancestors, known or unknown. There is thankfulness for all they did and all that they endured out of their struggle to live and out of their hope for what has become this present generation. Should we not—do we not—give thanks for those whose lives gave rise to our own?

For those who have been able to get past “religion’s capacity for bigotry and cruelty,” for those who are people of religious faith and religious doubt, thanksgiving is a time to humbly acknowledge that the creative power that brought forth the stars and space and our own watery planet, that the creative power that gave life and sustained life for all generations is a loving power that we name God. And, more specifically, we in this place confess together that this God has been and is made known to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

It is not by the might of our own hand nor by our cleverness, nor our knowledge, nor our creativity but by the loving grace of God that we have this life in all its goodness and sorrow, all its challenge and strength, all its glory and dust. It is from God that all blessing do indeed flow.

Of course, it is good and helpful to hear those words from Deuteronomy: “Remember the Lord your God, for it is God who give you power to get wealth.” We can all use that reminder. In all

our prosperity, look around. Begin by giving thanks, not for what you have, but for the God who gave you the ability to get the wealth you enjoy.

Remember that it is a gift.

It is, all of it, a gift.

Remember, too, that Gospel story—the good news—of those ten lepers.

They stand back as Jesus approaches and cry out in their need: “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” Mercy is not some vague “spiritual” concept. Mercy is a concrete act that involves us in healing, forgiveness, and restoration.

According to Luke, Jesus meets their need for mercy, for healing. They go as they are told and do as they are told. They discover on their way that they are healed.

That’s a pretty good story.

It reminds us that God’s care for us is given freely. It reminds us, even in this ongoing pandemic, that very often our needs *are* met—not because of our faith, not because of the many fine and noble things that we have done—but simply because of God’s grace. That is to say, we get more than we deserve and it all comes to us as a gift.

As we listen to this story, we remember that we do have housing and clothes and food and work and money. Many times, our needs for understanding and friendship and faith have been filled. We, too, have stood by the side of the road, crying out in our brokenness. And our cries were heard.

We are—all of us—there by the side of the road.

We come looking for mercy.

And we discover a new wholeness in our lives, in our selves.

When we have acknowledged our own brokenness, our own need, we are able to give thanks. Again, that’s not always our response—thanksgiving.

Often, we forget. Only one out of ten lepers came back to give thanks.

So, with the help given by a government holiday, for one day we stop the buying and the selling—mostly.

We stop the family bickering—mostly.

And we are thankful—mostly.

We remember that we are the heirs of a glorious and troubled past—as individuals, as a nation, as a world—living in a troubled yet in some ways glorious present—as individuals, as a nation, as a world. And we give thanks that we have come this far by grace, sheer grace.

We give thanks that when we are empty, God fills us. When we are strangers, God welcomes us. And with some slight echo of gratitude in our hearts we might go forward with some modicum of compassion for others: for refugees, for the homeless, for the hungry.

That is to say, in giving thanks we might become people of grace, people who, once healed and restored, return and say thank-you. We might find our place with Hebrew slaves, with Samaritan lepers, with Pilgrims, with refugees, with all the wretched of the earth and in doing so we might become more open to those who, like us, bear in themselves the very image of God.

That is the good news of this story from the Gospel of Luke: God loves all creation, all people, all nations. In Jesus Christ and in those who follow in the way of Jesus Christ, God's love can and will be made known.

Thankful people return to the source of the goodness that they have found.

Maybe we can come back with a few words of thanksgiving of our own.

Maybe we can show some basic Christian love, some basic Christian decency—which seems to be in such short supply these days.

Wherever we find ourselves this week—and with whomever we find ourselves, let us come to those places and those people with gratitude in our hearts for all the good that we have received—not from our own strength, not from the strength of our hands or the vast knowledge of our minds but from the good and generous hand and loving heart of God. And let us go from those places and those people and that day seeking to be a little more like the One whom we choose to follow: welcoming, receiving, healing, even astonished by the gratitude that we discover in others.

Let us recognize in one another our common humanity, that we all bear the image of our Creator and live with gratitude for that. In doing so, may we rise from our tables as better people with more open hearts to take on the challenges that are before us now.

And let us be thankful.

¹ *Gratitude*, pg. 7.

² *Gratitude*, pg. 20.