

*Thanksgiving Eve
November 22, 2017*

*Deuteronomy 8:2-12
1 Timothy 2:1-4
Luke 17:11-19*

Grace & peace from God our Father & our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Let me tell you a story – a few stories actually – about the power of gratitude. In the late 1990s I heard a speaker, Dr. Brian Resnick – a therapist specializing in treating post-traumatic stress disorder in parts of the world traumatized by war – give the keynote address at the Pennsylvania State Pastor’s Conference.

He spoke of the resilience of the human spirit, and about his work in Cambodia following the collapse of the Khmer Rouge Pol Pot regime. I you don’t recall, in the four years Pol Pot ruled Cambodia – 1975 to 1979 – one out of every four Cambodians died at the hands of his brutal regime. Every person in the country was traumatized by the genocide having lost loved ones in horrific ways. Day after day Dr. Resnick would listen to people’s horrific, gut wrenching stories of imprisonment, torture, inhumanity and inconceivable cruelty.

A pastor stood up and asked a question: *“We pastors accompany many people through traumatic times, sickness, loss and death, and most of us are quite familiar with how debilitating it can be when forced to hear too many heartbreaking things too close together. It can sap your strength and desire to live and enjoy your life and family. **How could you manage to listen to people’s personal traumas and tragedies day after day, month after month, without losing your hope and faith in life and humanity?**”*

He explained that he wouldn’t have been able to deal with the burden of his work had it not been for his daughter, his only child,

Sonja. He explained,

*My daughter was born with **Osteogenesis imperfecta** – the brittle bone disease. In contrast to parenting a healthy child with the occasional crisis or emergency, parenting for us was a daily ordeal of dealing with broken bones, medical complications, and the certainty that our child would only live to be 20, if she was lucky. I was simply not emotionally prepared to deal with the daily trauma and having to see my child suffer every single day, but I had to be there for she and her mother. So I developed healthy emotional habits. The one that worked best, and which I have continued for more than 30 years, is what you pastors would probably call prayer. Every morning I spend two minutes in absolute silence, sitting before the presence that is life itself, and I give thanks for the glory of every good thing in my life and in the world. I learned to face life in the face of tragedy with resolve and even daily joy in the midst of Sonja's illness – even her death at 21 – by spending two minutes every day in **a solitude wrapped in gratitude**. Once I began that daily practice, **I recognized the great irony that there was more joy in my life than in the lives of the many people I met every day who didn't have to walk every single day with a tragically afflicted, suffering, beloved child**. That was the tool that enabled me to hear about horrible, inhuman cruelty day after day without losing my mind or hope or faith in life itself.*

I shared this with you this evening because **Dr. Resnick's words resonate with both the founding of the Thanksgiving holiday we celebrate tomorrow and our gospel reading this evening**. Contrary to common legend, **the pilgrims did not originate our American Thanksgiving** to give thanks for surviving in the new world with the help of their native American neighbors. **Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the national day of thanksgiving we celebrate tomorrow in 1863**. He did not do so at a time

of national rejoicing, but at the lowest point in our nation's history. Lincoln declared the Thanksgiving Day we still celebrate today, knowing that 120,000 Americans had fallen in battle in the previous four months in the Civil War; the actual words of the proclamation are on the back of the bulletin. He does so ***acknowledging that God continues to provide abundantly and protect the nation from outside invasion, even as the nation works through the evil it has brought upon itself.***

In his wisdom President Lincoln understood that ***wellbeing, strength and joy do not come from the elimination or absence of strife, but from recognizing, celebrating and giving thanks for the blessings bestows on us by a gracious and merciful Lord*** – blessings people often take them for granted. Being a student of the Bible and a person of faith, Lincoln must have known of Jesus' encounter with the 10 lepers, which perhaps gave him insight into the power of gratitude to restore wholeness.

As we look at Jesus' encounter with the ten lepers a clear distinction emerges – ***physical healing and being made well are not the same thing.*** Jesus heals the leprosy of all ten lepers, but only one – a Samaritan gentile – is made well. ***When the ten lepers approach Jesus the misfortune that has befallen them – leprosy – defines them; it becomes the sole characteristic of their identity.*** No one – society nor themselves – see them as individuals with unique histories any longer; the ***leprosy has made them nothing more than part of a group of victims, sufferers for whom no future exists.*** The distinctions of religion and race

have disappeared; they are no longer Jew or Samaritan, no longer Israelites or gentile. **They are just lepers**, defined by both society and their own warning cries of “*unclean, unclean*” as objects of misery and shame.

Even after Jesus heals them, and after they realize that they’ve received healing, *they travel as group defined by their need to be declared clean*. But one man, the Samaritan – the man not seen as one of God’s chosen people – returns to give thanks to Jesus. *Leprosy no longer defines him*. Once identified solely as the victim of the misfortune that afflicted him, *now his eyes are opened, and he recognizes himself as a recipient of God’s goodness and favor*. Now Jesus’ mercy and favor towards him fill him. **Returning to give thanks becomes the only logical response.**

Given the choice to remain among those defined by their misfortunes – healed or unhealed – or to live in gratitude to God in this man Jesus, he chooses to be different. He returns to give thanks to Jesus, the one whose favor and mercy now defines him. To him and to Jesus it makes all the difference. Ten are made clean. Only the one is made whole.

Amen !!!