“One in Ten”

The Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 11, 2026

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Luke 17:11-19

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'"Were not ten made clean? But the other nine -where are they?"' Luke 17:17

The nurse said, "I'm going to give you a shot to take the pain away," and he did and it did. Almost instantly. And I fell asleep almost as quickly.

I'd been in pain for two days by then with what turned out to be a dying gall bladder. The attack couldn't have come at a more inconvenient time.

I'd just been examined for ordination in my home church in Indiana, and I was due to fly back to Scotland in two days. The attack had started on Saturday, and I'd managed to preach at the morning service on Sunday, but with such severe nausea and pain that I had a wastebasket in the pulpit, just in case.

Between the service and the ordination examination in the afternoon, I'd spent the time lying on one of the hard wooden pews in the sanctuary trying not to be sick. By the time I returned to the pulpit to be examined, I apparently looked pretty bad, because the moderator asked if I wanted to postpone. But since the pastoral position I already had in Scotland required ordination, I said no, I couldn’t afford to

postpone. So I soldiered on, apparently looking worse and worse as the day wore on.

Finally, after about two hours, I was excused while the assembly debated. As soon as the moderator informed me that I'd been approved for ordination and the applause began, one of the members of the church, a nurse, came up - to congratulate me, I thought – but she reached for my wrist. She looked at her watch, looked at me, and said, "You've got to go to a hospital. Get in my car."

And forthwith I found myself in the emergency room of Bloomington Hospital – shaking, sweating, vomiting, and in a great deal of pain.

Eventually a doctor examined me, said it was likely my gall bladder, and instructed the ER nurse to give me a shot of Demerol. You know what happened next.

But before I fell asleep, I offered what Anne Lamott calls one of life's most basic prayers: "Thank you."

Thank you, God. Thank you, nurse. (And thank you, Nurse Katherine, for being liturgist this morning.) Thank you, doc. Thank you, Bloomington Hospital. Thank you, western medicine. Thank you, researchers who developed Demerol. Thank you, member of my home church who attended my ordination exam. Thank all of you. It takes a village.

So it's a bit of a mystery why the other nine sufferers of a skin condition in this morning's gospel reading didn't bother to say thanks to Jesus when he delivered them from their suffering.

"The other nine - where are they?"

Was it a rhetorical question? Did Jesus have enough insight into human nature to know that even though we are often

cured, rescued, and helped by others we sometimes receive those gifts and simply move on, oblivious to the magnitude of what has just happened to us?

Or was Jesus genuinely puzzled why only one in ten people who had been healed of a disfiguring, debilitating, painful, and isolating disease returned to say thanks, and that not to Jesus but to God?

Might the differing responses have had something to do with the fact that the one who returned grateful was a Samaritan? Jesus calls him a foreigner, an outsider, someone not privileged by the majority population – the only one of the ten who thanked God for his redemption. Perhaps one of the things this story tells us is that getting in touch with our inner outsider might help redeem us from taking life for granted. The person whom Jesus' audience might least expect to be the

exemplary figure becomes the one who recognizes what has happened. The outsider sees something that the others, for reasons we cannot know, do not return to acknowledge.

So what might people at the margins of our society understand about grace that those of us more comfortably situated have difficulty seeing – the residents, for example, of the colonias that we learned about yesterday from Caly. Situations where people live with chronic exploitation have much to say about not taking even the most basic blessings of life for granted.

Expressing gratitude, however simply and briefly, establishes a relationship—a respectful and peaceful relationship. No matter how incidental or fleeting, establishing such a relationship is to practice what Judaism calls *tikkun*

olam, binding up the world. The world really is a better place every time we say thanks.

I spoke last week about redemption coming to us from God's future. Redemption also glances over its shoulder, to where we once were, going all the way back to Eden, if necessary, to show us God's loving intentions.

Some years ago, our reading group read *The Colony*, the heartbreaking story of the leper colony established on the Hawaiian island of Molokai in 1859. Even after an effective treatment for Hanson's Disease was discovered, allowing the residents to return to society, many were still shunned if their medical history was uncovered. One former resident said in 1983, "One of the worst things about having had this disease is that even after you're cured, society will not let you heal

because of [the] L-word. People don't know how hurtful and wrong that term is" (Daily Beast online, 8/30/15).

Society wouldn't let people heal because people refused to be in relationship with people who had been cured of Hanson's Disease, and restoring relationship is exactly what we see in that grateful man who returned to thank Jesus. His gratitude, and Jesus's compassion, allowed for the healing to take place that comes from relationship. Cure changes a person's condition. Relationships heal, and healing can change a person's relationship to the world.

The Samaritan man's return makes that second possibility visible. His gratitude does not prove that he deserved healing, nor does it establish that the other nine were left spiritually defective. His return shows what becomes possible **when someone recognizes a gift and turns back toward its giver.**

Sometimes a simple handshake between the right people can change the world for the better. I'm not talking just about presidents or prime ministers staging their official handshakes after some important agreement has been reached, although those handshakes sometimes matter for far more than publicity purposes.

I'm thinking of the photographs of handshakes from the 1980s, of Princess Diana shaking hands with people suffering from AIDS. Many young people today don't remember the enormous stigma attached to AIDS forty years ago, and how much fear and misinformation swirled around the people afflicted with that disease. A depressing number of religious people thought that AIDS was God's punishment not just on homosexuals but on a society that tolerates homosexuals (Washington Post, 5/19/07).

But both the book of Job and Jesus threw a wrench in the gears linking disease with punishment, and scripture itself struggles to find meaning in misfortune and suffering.

But while some were adding shame to suffering during the AIDS era, one prominent Christian, the Princess of Wales, was literally reaching out and forming relationships. A woman of enormous wealth, privilege, charisma, and influence used her blessings to help heal the world, and she did it with simple handshakes.

We'll never know why the other nine who had been cured didn't return to Jesus to say thanks. A sense of gratitude, manifest in actual behavior, can be the start of a new web of relationships, a new way of being in the world. Did they miss that opportunity? We'll never know.

What we do know is that **gratitude is the antidote to much that ails us.**

Like Scrooge, we become cold and small and dried up spiritually and sometimes physically when we become ungrateful. You don't have to be healed from a debilitating ailment to experience that sense of gratitude. As we grow spiritually, we grow more and more into gratitude. We become more and more aware of how utterly dependent we all are on God's grace for our existence, our persistence, and our blessings.

I know that it's not always easy to be grateful for our lives. Sometimes life can be brutal. The prophet Jeremiah knew that as well as the author of Psalm 137, who famously lamented, “By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept.”

The exiles in Babylon were living with displacement, loss, and the consequences of catastrophe. Jeremiah does not tell them to pretend their circumstances are good or not real. He tells them to build lives in the place where they find themselves, to plant gardens, to establish households, and to seek the welfare of the city in which they are living.

This is not a sentimental reading of gratitude. Gratitude is not a demand that suffering people count their blessings, nor is it a substitute for changing the circumstances that cause suffering.

Jeremiah is urging the exiles to partake of the goodness of creation that persists even amid suffering. That insight is echoed by John's words, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” That light is God’s image and likeness, and we can affirm that divine presence in

ourselves and embrace it with one another **while still naming injustice and working to overcome it.**

Caly spoke yesterday about the exile so many people are enduring today in the colonias along our southern border – the deprivation, the exploitation, the health problems, the vulnerability, the crime. The work to which Caly has devoted her life and energies springs from God's grace--the **grace that sustains life while refusing to accept as inevitable the conditions that diminish it.** Gratitude is not merely a private feeling toward God. **Gratitude can become an incentive to work for the well-being of other people and the communities we share.**

One of the worst things we can do to ourselves spiritually is to say, "I get to take credit for this," and expect to be thanked or applauded.

Beneath that surface layer of reality on which we all tend to operate day to day, and for which we accept either credit or blame, lies the deeper reality that allows any of those superficial realities to exist.

None of us is here, with all our gifts and skills and opportunities and blessings and challenges, because we have a right to be here. We're here because of God's love and mercy and grace, so often expressed through the compassion of others. To this day I remain grateful to that ER nurse, just doing his job, who worked wonders for me in my hour of need. And behind his pushing the plunger of that hypodermic of Demerol lay years of training, experience, and dedication. I knew that then, I know it now, and I am grateful for the grace of God that enabled all of it, **including my gratitude.** I take no credit for even that.

We are not self-made. Even our most personal achievements depend on gifts and relationships we did not originate. Gratitude is a way of recognizing that dependence, not a way of claiming moral superiority over people who are less grateful. Perhaps the most fruitful question we can ask ourselves is not whether we are grateful enough, but whether we can recognize how much of our lives is gift rather than possession or entitlement.

Let me close by telling you about a friend.

A close friend of mine has survived cancer four times—the surgeries, the rounds of chemotherapy, the radiation treatments, the follow-up visits, the seemingly endless round of specialists. Because of the surgery that removed part of her throat, she has to think every time she swallows so that she doesn't choke. Because of the kidney cancer that was the first

appearance of the disease in her body, she has to be very careful to care for her remaining kidney. Because of her compromised immune system, COVID was more than an isolating experience: it was terrifying.

And so, every morning, she and her wife sit with their coffee side by side in their rocking chairs looking out over the river that flows near their home, watching the birds compete at the feeder, hoping to catch a glimpse of the otters frolicking in the water, and cherishing every leaf that turns and falls and buds again in spring. She is grateful—they are grateful—for every grace-filled minute.

We're able to be who we are because of God's grace, we're willing to give back because of God's grace, and we love because of God's grace. It's all grace.

Perhaps, like that one Samaritan, we will recognize the reality of God's grace and go through life being grateful in response. Might we pray to be that one?