

HOW THANKSGIVING TRANSFORMS US

Luke 17: 11-19; 2 Corinthians 9: 6-15

Rima came to Canada just a few years ago. She came as a refugee from Syria. Even though Rima is a young woman, what she has seen and lived is horrific. She has witnessed the death of people close to her - beaten, tortured or caught in the crossfire. She herself was abused and violated. Whether it is Syrian troops or rebel groups, Rima knows firsthand the perverse evil that can possess fighters who do the violating and those who stand by and look away.

And yet, and yet, Rima's energy is not on the negative. Rima is full of ideas of what she wants to do now that she is here in Canada. She wants to study to become a doctor. She wants to work in advocacy for torture victims. She wants to volunteer to support women who have suffered rape. Her energy for the possibilities now opened up for her is also coupled with huge amounts of thanksgiving. She is thankful to be here in Canada. She is thankful for the opportunities. She is thankful to be able to engage all those terrible things she has suffered and seen by developing positive ways to do something for others. A dose of Rima is what we all need, I think, especially on this Thanksgiving Sunday.

But why is it... why is it that we need to be reminded and inspired to thanksgiving? Why is it that too often it is easier for us to sink down into what's wrong, what's missing and what's unfair about life? What is it that we can really learn from human beings like Rima? And do we have to go through what she's been through to be changed by the practice of thanksgiving in our own lives?

Let's explore such questions through our scripture readings. Let's begin with our gospel reading. It's all about thanksgiving. But the insight into thanksgiving, I think, can really help us do some evaluating in our own lives. Jesus is on a journey. He will end up in Jerusalem where we know what happens. But on his way, Jesus is engaging people, doing for people and all of it is communicating the very gospel he is living.

As he enters one village, he is approached by 10 lepers. They're keeping their distance because it is against the law for lepers to come close. Leprosy then would be equivalent to the AIDS crisis in North America in the 1980s and 90s. People were scared they would pick up AIDS just by coming into contact or proximity to those infected. People were also judging AIDS sufferers as deserving the terrible disease because of sinful lifestyle choices. Lepers suffered the same fate. Not only was the disease itself disgusting to behold as human skin basically rotted. But disease

in the ancient world was also believed to be a consequence of bad moral choices by the person suffering the disease or their family in some way. One way or the other, the sufferer of the disease was blamed and it let others off the hook of having to care for them, feel compassion for them or be around them. They could banish them and force them to keep their distance.

But these lepers in particular not only come close to Jesus. They seem to know he's coming and are quite intentional in finding him. They call out: 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!' Jesus responds immediately. Whatever else he's doing and whoever else he may be talking with, he stops and engages them as human beings. He tells them this: 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' Showing themselves to the priests and receiving a bill of clean health would provide their entry ticket back to their villages, homes, family and friends. Isn't this awesome?!

But let's think about this all for a moment. Why would they go through all the trouble of tracking Jesus down, approaching him among a hostile crowd, taking a chance that he would respond in a healing way, that healing is even possible, that the progression of their disease can be stopped and maybe even reversed? And why would they start making their way to Jerusalem to find a priest at the temple who would provide a bill of clean health when nothing has even happened yet to guarantee they are healing?

That's a lot of trouble to go through, unless... unless they believe something good can happen. Isn't it amazing? Such a demonstration of faith. Jesus responds to such faith and Jesus inspires such faith. Unless we believe something extraordinary can happen in our lives, we'll never explore what's possible.

But this is not the end of the story. Even as they are making their way to Jerusalem and wondering whether something miraculously healing will happen to them in response to their faith, we're told that one of the 10... just one... when he sees and feels what is happening in his body stops dead in his tracks. He has to go back. He has to find Jesus again. Without Jesus, all the faith in the world he may have had would not have been enough. The two had to go together – his faith and Jesus. And so, we're told, 'he turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He came and prostrated himself at Jesus' feet.'

We're also told he happens to be a Samaritan. Samaritans are not Jews proper. Samaritans are outsiders. And not only that. Samaritans and Jews hate each other. Even though as lepers they would band together with a common misery, in ordinary life, Jews and Samaritans have minimal traffic with each other. Jesus the Jew heals indiscriminately - Jews, Samaritans and gentiles alike. The fact that the other nine lepers who are Jews don't come back to thank Jesus whereas as the only one who does happens to be a Samaritan, says a lot. What's the insight here?

Just like Rima the Syrian refugee, it's often the outsiders who are better equipped to appreciate what they are given and what doors have been opened. They receive what they're given as a gift for which thanksgiving is the appropriate response. To see what we have and what we're given as a gift is to believe that it could easily be otherwise. To see what we have and what doors have been opened for us as a gift is to feel compassion for all those who are not so privileged as we are. To see what we have and what we're given as a gift is also to experience an inner call to engage others in our world out of thanksgiving.

Too many people in the world immediately around us here in Canada do not see and feel the giftedness of life. Rather than thanksgiving, so much is simply taken for granted. So much is felt as something owed or deserved or the result of hard work alone. Too often things are seen as a right, and sometimes, because it's a right it's not something we have to be thankful for as a gift. To see something as a right rather than as a gift is to fail to understand a basic truth: it could be otherwise if circumstances were different. If we weren't born in the right place, been surrounded by love and support and generous resources, exposed to wonderful teachers and role models, supported, protected and encouraged as we grew and developed... if none of this was in our lives, what would happen to us for all our potential?

But even beyond the recognition of the importance of thanksgiving for what we have received tangibly as a gift, there is a whole inner transformation thanksgiving can accomplish in our lives. There are constantly new scientific studies being published that are able to map the long term well being of people according to an index of a thanksgiving attitude. People not only do better socially when they are thankful, but they develop much greater inner resilience and healing capacities when living out of a genuine spirit of thanksgiving. There are even chemical changes to the brain that happen when qualities like faith in God and thanksgiving in spirit are active ingredients in people's inner spiritual and emotional constitution.

And this brings us to our second reading – words of the apostle Paul to the Corinthians. This letter is a difficult letter as a whole as Paul is struggling with some difficult stuff in his relationship with the Corinthians. The biggest single challenge Paul is having is in building bridges of friendship and fellowship between Jews and gentiles in the church, and especially between the Jewish dominated church in Jerusalem and the gentile dominated churches in the rest of the world. But Paul thinks he has found a way. The Jerusalem church is very poor. Many of the gentile churches have greater resources. What an opportunity for the gentile churches to send money to help the Jerusalem church as a gesture of generous compassion for brothers and sisters of the same faith. The church started in Jerusalem and grew out of the Jewish faith. Recognizing this truth in thanksgiving is a wonderful response to the gospel of Jesus.

But what is most fascinating of all, is that Paul's arguments for collecting this money are not based on what gentiles owe Jews or the fact that people should be giving generously to the

church. Rather, Paul focusses on all the benefits that come from giving generously from the heart in thanksgiving. Paul declares that what we receive when we give cheerfully, from our hearts, is much greater than anything we can give. We receive an inner feeling of abundance to overflowing. We receive not only an inner contentment but a feeling of the richest kind of fulfillment. We feel closer to God and more deeply rooted in life-giving core values and purposes. Life is reoriented and grounded in what truly matters when we live out of thanksgiving.

In essence, then, Paul is saying this: don't thank God or others because you have to. Express thanksgiving and put your heart into it because it will change you. Don't just give generously because others need it. Do it because it will transform the way you see, the way you live and the way you will celebrate life's value and joy. Not that we have to choose between what serves us and what serves others. The sincerer we are when we give and the more genuine we are when we say thank you for the right reasons, the more we will experience the healing and transformational power of God in our lives – body, mind and soul. It's all connected.

So then, let us find our inspiration in the Samaritan leper who is healed. Let us find our inspiration in the generosity of early Christians who gave what they had for the welfare of brothers and sisters they had never met. Let us find our inspiration in people like Rima who can teach us how much thanksgiving can grow in our hearts and lives when we recognize life as a gift and opportunity for service, even when awful things are part of our life experience too. Let us find new inspiration to make thanksgiving an intentional, spiritual practice in our lives... Amen.