

Expectation vs. Appreciation ~ How to Define a Life
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Luke 17: 11-19
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Let us pray: *Teach us to practice gratitude in our lives that we may honor the graciousness at the center of your creation, Loving God. Forgive every form of self-centeredness that assumes we are entitled to what we have and make us mindful of every good gift and of every good gift-giver. Help us live lives defined by grateful prayers for the many blessings of your Grace found in each new day. Amen.*

SERMON:

It was a tragic heart-wrenching scene: his stooped back heavily burden by the devastation... his arm outstretched with the fingers of his weathered hand desperately gripping the living room post for balance because what was once familiar was now completely upside down and inside out. Literally, every single item of his home was now scattered about in a chaotic jumbled up mess—a pile of stuff still smelling like the sea; that unwelcomed visitor in the night that relentlessly pushed its way through windows and doors and cracks in the floor, which hastened his retreat up into the upper rafters of the attic. For only up there could he escape the danger—avoiding the fate of becoming yet another victim of Hurricane Sandy.

In the gloom of his little house, in what was once his living room, I stood behind Joseph as he looked for the first time at the contents of his home, drenched and destroyed. He leaned heavily on the post as if to gather the needed strength for the inevitable cries of anguish that would surely follow.

It was so tragic...

I stood there helplessly witnessing the complete devastation of his worldly belongings. In an odd way, the sight of that room amazed me because from the outside the house remained in perfect order. No broken windows. No torn pieces of siding or gaping holes. But the inside the house resembled what would happen if the entire structure became a huge washing machine.

Nothing was right... everything was not where it should have been.

I just stood there behind Joseph taking in the scene not knowing what to say or do...there was so much destruction:

- The overturned refrigerator reeking of two weeks worth of spoilage.
- The antique china cabinet now on its side hiding the crushed blue and white china dishes and teacups and various heirlooms from better days.
- The reams of papers adhered to the still wet muddy floor — including cherished letters from his sweetheart written in red pen and the deed to their home, which they bought many years ago to raise their beautiful family.
- Albums containing old snap shots of his days as a Marine. Photos capturing laughter and warm embraces in summer sun-lit days—joy-filled moments that seemed lost forever now. There were hundred of photos held prisoner now by the very pages of the albums, which had become permanently stuck together by the encrusted salt.

- And his books... his many beloved books which he cherished more than his own life—having collected them over most of his 79 years—were now strewn about the room, having been soaked for days in the toxic stew of brine and fifth... rendering them into bricks.

As I stood there in my angst, I wondered, could this dear sweet man, who relied on a cane on good days and a walker when the weight of his own frame became too much, bear up under the impact this terrible storm had on his life?

I considered all these things as I stood behind him in the doorway not knowing what to say...

Then, I heard him make a sound, quietly at first, but then it started to grow, for the sight of everything that lay before him had finally moved him to give voice to his feelings.

But... much to my astonishment, it was not the cry of a man overwhelmed by such a cruel tragedy or the voice of one who could only curse God for the pain and anguish he was now suffering.

No, Joseph was singing! In Hebrew in fact... which was the second surprise that came with his serenade, for I did not know until that moment that he was an African American Jew. Yes, in the midst of a world turned completely upside down and what could only be considered personal ruin since there was no insurance to cover the cost... Joseph was singing!

Singing Psalms of Gratitude in the Midst of Complete Devastation!

And in *that* moment, my grief and awkwardness gave way to feelings of profound privilege as I listened to Joseph express his heartfelt gratitude... for his life. He sang because he honestly felt blessed to be alive.

Because of my limited Hebrew (don't tell my seminary professors), I had to ask Joseph what he was singing.

"Psalm 100," came the reply:

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.
Know that the Lord is God.
It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.
Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.
For the Lord is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

Suddenly, I was no longer on 565 Beech Street in Rockaway Queens NY. I was on Holy Ground! Bearing witness to this remarkable man of faith as he offered, without restraint, his profound sense of gratitude that welled up in his heart.

For me, in that prayerful moment of Grace, my own life took on a deeper meaning through the sound of his deep rich voice as he offered his song of gratitude. I will never forget Joseph and his song.

Gratitude is not a universal response to life, even among those of us who have received so much.

As my friend, Martin Copenhaver is fond of saying, “We live in a time of extraordinary abundance, but that has not led us to greater thankfulness. In fact, it seems that a defining characteristic of our age is that we live with an extraordinary sense of entitlement. In other words, we have much and, for the most part, it seems we have concluded that we deserve all that we have. How many people in our day were born on third base and yet act as if they’ve hit a triple? Gratitude can so easily slip through the heart without taking hold and stick on the tongue without being expressed.”

I suppose it is not necessarily a modern failure.

Winston Churchill liked to tell the story of a boy rescued from drowning by a passerby. The next day, the rescuer was approached by the boy’s mother, who said, with great depth of feeling, “Sir, yesterday you rescued my boy from drowning. When he went into the water, he had a hat on; where is that hat?”

This morning’s text from Luke, the healing of the Ten Lepers speaks directly to the importance and rarity of Gratitude. Clearly, more is at stake in this story than demonstrating polite social etiquette. Since we cannot know for sure why the other nine didn’t return. I think the meaning of this passage might boil down to a question, *which Jesus did not ask*: Why did the one return?

Perhaps part of the answer may be found in the identity of this healed man. He was a leper like the other nine. But alone among the ten, he was a Samaritan. “*As such, he was twice scorned, twice rejected, twice removed from the community. As a leper, he was unclean ritually and, therefore, to be isolated, an object, no doubt, of revulsion and fear on the part of his neighbors. And as a Samaritan he would have been seen as an outsider—and a despised one at that—to the more orthodox Jews of Galilee.*” Copenhaver

Perhaps this Samaritan leper suffered more, and thus his healing evoked a more profound sense of gratitude. So, he felt compelled to run and throw himself at the feet of the one who brought such a blessing of healing. This may be, it would be a natural assumption.

But his gratitude might also be the mark of a faithful decision made earlier in life and exhibited along the journey in other ways. The faith-filled decision to live a life of Gratitude and not just one of Expectation.

I believe this is Jesus’ call on that day when he asks those around him, “Where are the others? Where are those whose lives have been changed and made whole again? Have they forgotten the source of every good blessing, the spirit responsible for their very lives?”

It is easy to forget. Many of us do. I know I have on one too many occasions.

This we are told: Ten were healed. Nine took off. One returned to offer thanks. But they were all healed. All ten were healed. Notice this: nine went off to resume their lives.

The other one, however, did not merely resume his life. He had his life changed in a way the others did not. When he returned and fell at Jesus’ feet and thanked him, Jesus said, “Get up and go your way; your faith has made you well.” Ten were healed of their disease, but only one was made well—that is, made whole,

completed. It is a distinction worth making. In fact, it is a critical one. You can be cured of a disease and still lead an incomplete or fractured life. You can be cured of a disease and still long to be well in the fullest sense—to be made whole.

That is the gift that the one who returned to offer thanks was given—the gift of wholeness. There is something about offering thanks that makes us whole.

As we began exploring Joseph's darkened house together and the full impact Sandy's wrath was made clear, I found that our journey together had a curious effect on my heart. For in spite of his limited physical strength and the fact that he was truly victimized by this terrible storm, instinctively he was lifting me up through his delightful observations and words of wisdom, which were firmly rooted in faith. Slowly, we made our way around the house together, no longer as strangers.

I, offering my arm for assistance when the way was decidedly not safe, he, offering words of calm assurance when tears clouded my vision. I remember one moment in particular, when I allowed my face to register the shock I felt upon viewing his bedroom for the first time, he took my hand and offered encouragingly, "This too shall pass. There is a season for everything."

Then something remarkable happened. As we made our way together, it was slowly becoming apparent to me that Joseph was looking for something. I wondered what it might be? A favorite trophy heralding a victory still cherished? A ring of some great value—sentimental or otherwise? An expensive gadget that he hoped might have survived the tumult somehow. I really didn't know, until he found them with a shout and tears began to flow, tears not of sadness but of joy and even deeper gratitude.

For Joseph had found his Prayer Shawl and his beloved Torah, which he immediately brought outside to dry out in the sun.

I had the pleasure of knowing Joseph for just one day, but, the gratitude for life this man held so dearly, in the midst of so much turmoil and pain, will be a shining example I will carry in my heart forever. His time, now finished, on this earth, was an example for us all.

A life defined by Gratitude.

A life of Living Prayer

I strive to live such a life.

How about you?