

INSUFFICIENT GRATITUDE

I was talking with a colleague recently about one of our churches that seems to be in serious trouble. Back in the '40s and '50s, it was a grand church with enormous prestige and reputation. Now, with well-meaning people, both lay and professional, giving years of dedicated time and energy, the church has dwindled until only a handful gather in the vast sanctuary on Sunday. Even the huge endowment fund which has been sustaining salaries and maintenance costs is now running out. With all the other problems in the world, few people mourn for dying churches unless they happen to belong to them. But what seems saddest is the report that for years now, the people of that church have been quarreling with each other over every detail, every circumstance, every decision. It has become their pattern, their way of life. With less and less hope and more and more problems, it is easy to start chewing on each other. The last ray of light would be to love each other, enjoy each other's company, appreciate each other – and if the church dies, it dies. At least Christian love would not die with it. But that is not what is going on. Does it remind you of anybody you know? Any marriages you know about? Any companies you have heard about? It is easy to go negative, even with the best intentions – even in the name and claim of trying to fix things.

Sometimes we are startled by the remarks of people from other countries who come to visit the United States. It is a familiar scenario: They make comments about the many wonders they have seen and how this country seems so blessed with such a high standard of living – so many people have fine cars and houses and hobbies they can indulge – and the array of activities and possibilities is enormous. But then they say, quietly, as if embarrassed or perplexed, that we also seem to be the most unhappy people in the world. Statistics about divorce and depression and mental illness do not help much to dispel these unfair impressions.

Have you ever watched from afar – as an uninvolved objective observer – while parents try to entice and persuade their children to appreciate and enjoy some scene of vast and sweeping beauty? It happens across the land every summer: “We have traveled all this way just so you could behold this wonder ...” [cave, canyon, tree, mountain, or whatever]. And though the words are not always spoken, you can feel them underneath as the young person yawns and acts bored. “The least you could do is *act* impressed and grateful when we went to all the trouble and expense to bring you here. Look again! Can't you see it?”

Of course, there are two sides to gratitude: those who feel grateful, and those who receive gratitude. I have no intention of trying to define, delineate, or exegete the vast wonder of the concept of gratitude this morning. But I have been pondering it, so naturally I think you should ponder it too. And there is a Catch-22. Pretend gratitude is every bit as inspiring as pretend love, pretend faith, and pretend hope. We cannot just decide to fall into gratitude any more than we can decide to fall in love. And even if we decide that we should be more grateful, that conclusion alone will do us little good. On the other hand, if there is the genuine possibility of wonder and light and life all around us, perhaps we could at least turn the dial on our inner radar system, in the hope that we might start receiving more awareness than we have before.

It is said that in the Babemba tribe of South Africa, when a person acts irresponsibly or unjustly, he is placed in the center of the village, alone and unfettered. All work ceases and every man, woman, and child in the village gathers in a large circle around the accused individual. Then each person in the tribe speaks to the accused, one at a time, about all the good things this person has done in their lifetime. Every incident is recounted. All the positive attributes, good deeds, strengths, and kindnesses are recited carefully and at length. The tribal ceremony often lasts several days. At the end, the tribal circle is broken, a joyous celebration takes place, and the person is welcomed back into the tribe.

I know where I heard this account, but I do not know how apocryphal or embellished it might be. If you tried this in our culture, all work would cease, the nation would be bankrupt in a week, and fifteen percent of our citizens would be committing irresponsible acts just so they could hear the kudos of the circle over again. But it is psychologically intriguing, isn't it? If the community thinks you are valuable – expresses real appreciation for you – how much desire would be left to do damage or harm? What if, in the face of mistakes and problems, we found ways to call each other back to our highest, instead of seeking vengeance or punishment?

What is the issue in the story of Jesus and the ten lepers? (Luke 17:12-19) Ten are healed of leprosy; one returns to give thanks – a foreigner, a Samaritan. Did the other nine take it for granted? “We are good Jews; we deserve better than this. Other people have good health, why shouldn't we have good health? It has all been a nightmare, and it's high time it was over. Thanks Jesus, but for us to be healed is only fair and just.”

What is the issue? Is Jesus upset because He is not getting enough praise? Has it hurt His ego that nine of the ten did not come back to thank Him more? We know Jesus better than that. At least I hope we do. Jesus is sad because the nine have aced themselves out of the biggest blessing. Do we really see and understand that? Gratitude transforms us. Gratitude is one of the most potent motive powers in the world. If I am grateful, it will change my life – whether I realize it or not. Gratitude changes our course and it fuels us with an unsung energy – a quiet power that sustains us and energizes us, sometimes for years, sometimes even for a lifetime. The greater the gratitude, the more it changes us.

Do you know what one of the greatest cures is for marital problems? Illness or accident. I counsel people who can barely speak to each other – who are sure their love is dead and gone. Nothing I can say or do is getting through. Then disaster comes along and changes everything in an instant. They are reminded how much they care. They feel each other's support and attentiveness and love. Gratitude returns, and the alienation is over. Mind you, I have not created the disasters to bring these results – at least not yet. "Lord, lead me not into temptation ..."

Many barriers fell under Jesus' influence. One of the first and least publicized was the barrier between Jew and Samaritan. (In John 8:48, Jesus is even accused of being a Samaritan, thus revealing the animosity toward His acceptance of Samaritans.) I have no information, but I presume this healed leper became a follower, and perhaps a leader of the Samaritan Christian movement. Why do I presume this? Because it is the way of gratitude. If this man felt the power that healed him and he responded enough to come back and thank Jesus personally, how is he *not* going to end up a follower? As the saying goes: Show me a grateful person whose life is not moved and changed, and I will show you a liar.

We may not be as bright as Jesus, but I think it is the same with most of us too. We do not want the gratitude or the accolades for personal reasons – not for personal aggrandizement. But we hope for the larger blessing that comes to every person who is truly grateful. We want for them gratitude's power to transform and redeem life. How many juvenile delinquents have lives filled with gratitude? Well, they have had hard lives; that is why they are delinquents. You think so? I think if they found a deep and genuine gratitude, they would stop being delinquents. If you think I think that is a pat answer or an easy solution, you are not hearing me at all.

Do you know that it is difficult to be grateful and self-centered at the same time? Can you think back to the times in your own life when you were most filled with gratitude? Were you content to keep the blessings to yourself, or were you fairly bursting to spread the goodness to others? People touched by genuine gratitude are transformed and redeemed in some way. People who are touched with genuine gratitude have in some way been touched by God.

Of course, we all think of ourselves as grateful people. I mean, who wants to admit that they are not very grateful? And I am sure that to some degree it is true. I have always thought of myself as a grateful person. I have a very great deal to be grateful for. I have, as most of you know, kept some track of the many times and ways I have been picked up, saved, changed, taken out of dead-end situations, placed on new and different paths, given new chances and opportunities. More of my life than you could possibly know has been the feeble but sincere attempt on my part to say, "Thank you." I am not only grateful to Jesus, though it seems clear to me that He is the primary source of all this; I am also exceedingly grateful to His many friends who have been drawn into these efforts, and whom I see constantly engaged in His efforts to help and rescue or enhance the lives of many others as well. But always the key factor is gratitude. That is, if people recognize what is happening and respond in gratitude, the impact is huge and the results are enormous. Not always flashy, but enormous. And if a person does not realize – or realizes but does not respond in gratefulness – then very little happens in the long run, no matter how much has been done for them.

As I say, I have always thought of myself as a grateful person. But meditating on the subject recently, I felt suddenly overwhelmed by my lack of gratitude. Insufficient gratitude is one of the deeper regrets I have about how I have conducted my life. And what I saw that I had never seen before is that I stop the gratitude on purpose. I do not set out to do so on purpose, of course. But it happens like this:

I feel overwhelmed by the time, concern, and attention lavished on me by the Holy Spirit of Jesus – often enhanced, as I say, by some of His human servants and helpers. I cannot help but want to show my gratitude and thankfulness. So I reorganize my life, or some of the ways I am conducting my life, in order to show this gratitude. But then I get to thinking about how small and puny my efforts are to show my gratitude. The acts and evidence of gratitude seem so small and insignificant. So I start trying harder. You probably aren't following this

at all, but that is what happens to me, kind of when I'm not looking – when I am not even aware of what is happening.

The next thing I know, I am deep into efforts to make things work better – to make changes and progress and do things that will have a greater impact – so it will show my gratitude more appropriately. But there are always problems in this world, and things or people that resist any change. But by now I am thinking about the problems and trying to solve them – trying to figure ways around them or through them. I am trying to fix things or people – trying to get it to work – trying to make it happen. I don't put it this way, even inside myself, but it's like I want to build a monument – you know, leave the world a better place. And meanwhile, what has happened to my gratitude? I cannot even remember it. I am too busy trying to fix things.

In more familiar language and constructs: I have shifted from Gospel back to Law. When I go into fix-it mode, I am back in the Law. My focus is on problems and solutions. CHANGE FROM WITHOUT. When I am in gratitude mode, it is pure Gospel – wonder, amazement, appreciation, delight. I am drawn toward the light, the beauty, the source. It is not a duty, not a responsibility – just a wonder and a delight. I cannot help but want to respond. CHANGE FROM WITHIN. Gratitude leads us and draws us toward light – hope, truth, beauty, purpose, meaning. That is the point. I am hoping that somebody here will see it more clearly than they ever have before. If so, they will find themselves drawn into more gratitude than they have ever known before.

So why are some of our churches dying? They have gone out of gratitude mode and into fix-it mode – into the solutions business. Churches can only thrive on gratitude: delight in their Lord ... wonder at His caring and love ... joy in His presence and in the Life He breathes into us.

I think it is one of the great frustrations of life when we feel gratitude and cannot seem to inspire those around us to that same gratitude. I mentioned the parents trying to inspire their children to appreciate the great wonders of nature that they were trying to show them. Of course, sometimes the children may be drinking in more than they let on and, once they get back home, they may be telling their friends a very different version of their experience. And why do you suppose we have a multi-billion-dollar photography industry? More than one reason, of course, but the overriding reason is that we want to

inspire others to appreciate what we have appreciated. “See what I saw – wasn’t it beautiful?”

Behind it all there is an awareness – conscious or unconscious – that if we were all filled with more appreciation and gratitude, the world would not be as bleak and difficult as it is. What if everybody appreciated our history better than they do? What if everybody appreciated George Washington and Abraham Lincoln as much as we think they ought to? Certainly such men deserve more understanding and awareness – more comprehension on our part – of all they did and went through to bring incredible benefit to us, still today. Could our country *keep* from living better, higher, more noble lives if all our citizens truly appreciated the sacrifices and purposes and vision of our founding leaders? Or what of all those who have died to keep us free? Can we ever have gratitude enough or awareness enough? What of all those who have sacrificed that we might have education and faith and resources in such abundance? How could so many end up with so *little* gratitude for it all that now their lives are reduced to their own problems, their own desires, their own tiny plans for prosperity and comfort and pleasure? And even that would not be so sad, if it did not lead them so inevitably into blighted, depressed, unfulfilled, unhappy lives.

And to be sure (we cannot help but wonder), why is there so little gratitude in our land, in our culture – even in many of our churches – for Jesus? Even if we did not know Jesus as the living presence of the Holy Spirit, still constantly trying to bless, awaken, lead, comfort, and redeem us; even if all we knew was the story of the Galilean who walked and taught and healed and struggled to awaken His nation so many years ago; even if we only knew His story of faithfulness – and the rising anger against Him, and the way He responded to it all – carving new awareness, new truth, and a new Way to live with almost every step He took ... even with all that, how is it possible that so many have so little appreciation for Jesus?

I even talk to people – not once in a while, but over and over again – who claim no gratitude for Jesus, who even say point-blank that they cannot really fathom why Jesus is so important to so many. Then they go right on to claim that *God* is what they care about, and they proceed to describe a God who is quite similar to the God revealed in Jesus Christ. It seems never to have occurred to them that apart from what Jesus did and endured and suffered and died for, no such concept of God would exist upon the earth.

Maybe that is okay. It is not okay with me – not for myself, you can be very sure – but maybe that *is* okay. What is *not* okay – meaning, really sad – is that this lack of appreciation – this lack of gratitude – is also and inevitably the loss of an incredible relationship between that person and Jesus. Gratitude is the power that transforms us ... that sets us in new directions ... that fuels our lives with meaning and possibilities we did not know existed before. Gratitude leads us – it does not push or coerce us, it *leads* us – toward light, and truth, and meaning, and purpose. Especially gratitude toward Jesus does this. It is this gratitude that has been transforming lives for over two thousand years now. It is not the creeds, the structures, the good works, the charity, or even the Bible study or the traditions. It is gratitude toward Jesus that fuels the life of the *ecclesia* – the true church.

We cannot produce that. We cannot bottle it, sell it, inject it, or threaten anybody into it. Not that we would want to. But I hope nobody here is willing to go their whole lives without it. And while you cannot manufacture it either, you can seek it, and want it, and open yourself to it. And the problem, as always, is that we know, without being told or taught, that if we open ourselves to this gratitude, it will change and transform us. Understandably, some people prefer to hang on to themselves a little longer. The problem is, we end up with what we hang on to. Gratitude is so much better than that.

PRAYER

Great Spirit, we have each had our moments of deep and profound gratitude or we would not be here. Sometimes when life gets hard and things are going wrong all around us – or even in us – the gratitude just increases. Even the contrast between the life going on around us and the beauty and wonder of Your presence fills us with awe and wonder, and great gratitude for Your care. And sometimes we even realize that we do not feel the pain as much as You do – because Your goodness shields us from evil – or we do not understand what life could be like in contrast to Your true Kingdom.

We have each had our moments of deep and profound gratitude, but sometimes they grow dim. Even we cannot believe it, but sometimes we forget, or neglect, or let it leak away. We even do it with each other. We are so sorry that we are not more constant, more patient, more enduring in returning our love. We want to be. We mean to be. But we have long since stopped trusting in our virtues anyway. It is Your virtue and Your constancy that we trust. If You do not keep calling us back from our distractions ... finding us when we get lost ... loving us when we feel absolutely worthless ... forgiving us when we forget You – then there is no hope for us.

But then we remember the Cross, and the Resurrection, and the last time we called and You came so much faster than we expected or deserved. What can we say? Thank You for this day. Thank You for this training camp. Thank You for staying with us. Amen.