

Sermon given by John H. Kemp
Pilgrim Congregational Church
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Thanksgiving Sunday
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AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

Psalm 92:1-4
Luke 17:11-19

In current slang, when we say someone has "an attitude," we're usually warning, "Look out! He's got an attitude problem," or "She's got a baaad attitude!" To have "an attitude" is a cut-down, a negative. As often happens, slang distorts a word's full meaning. Actually, we know attitude is value-free: people have all kinds of attitudes - sweet and sour, generous and stingy, forgiving and vengeful, friendly and aloof, and so forth. The person I am is made up of all the attitudes I reflect in the words I speak and the behavior I do. Most of us hope our good attitudes outweigh our bad and we don't come across as someone "with an attitude" in the slang sense.

Today we lift up one - "the attitude of gratitude," not as a "holiday platitude" for this one week a year, but as a basic way we can respond to life that shapes who we are and what we do.

Ryan White became famous at the age of twelve, not as a rock star or child prodigy, but when he contracted AIDS through a contaminated blood transfusion. To know that your days are numbered and you may not even make it through high school was tough enough. But for this courageous boy, the disease itself wasn't the toughest thing he had to face. Not by a long shot.

Back in 1985 relatively little was known about the spread of AIDS. Fear was rampant. Ryan wanted to go to school, but the school board and administration wouldn't let him. What if he spread the disease all over school? Could you be infected by drinking from the same fountain? What about the toilets? Would he have to be given his own to protect the other children? In face of unrelenting community fear and hostility, it was easier to keep him out of school. That must have been much tougher than the disease itself - to be a social outcast, to have people terrified of him, to be judged contaminated and unclean so other children would be forbidden to go near him. Amazingly, Ryan remained unbowed - he lived and died courageously and with gratitude for his family and all who rallied around him and for the blessings of life itself. His enduring legacy was his ability to transcend not only the disease itself, but all the hurt and rejection heaped upon him.

Leprosy was the AIDS-like disease of Jesus' day. Not only was it physically horrible - fingers and toes dropping off, face becoming scarred and disfigured - the social stigma was even worse. Lepers were excluded from the community, forced to live in separate leper colonies well outside town. You couldn't live with your family or even touch your spouse, children, or parent. If you did enter town for some reason, you were required to shout, "Unclean! Unclean!" so people could scurry out of the way to avoid contamination. What a terrible way to live - and with no hope of cure! Society had no compassion, no desire to help these people - after all, they were being punished for their sins; they were owed nothing!

Luke's story described the ten lepers who, hearing of Jesus' fame as a healer, rushed to him as he approached their village. Imagine the picture: Jesus and his disciples, walking the dusty road, suddenly confronted, not by one or two, but this crowd of filthy, ragged, wretched, desperate human beings, fearing to come too close, but calling out pitifully, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" We beg you: don't reject and condemn us like everyone else. See us as we are and have mercy!

They pleaded for no ordinary cleansing, no ordinary healing: they begged for their very humanness to be restored, nothing less. In his deep compassion, Jesus did just that - by not turning his back on them, by acknowledging them and simply instructing them to go to the authorities for a "clean bill of health." As they went, they felt themselves strangely changed. They looked at one another: to their astonishment, they had been cleansed! But only one thought to praise God and return to thank Jesus.

When he did, Jesus asked him, "Were there not ten? Where are the nine?" Maybe they were preoccupied with thoughts of getting back to family, of getting a "fresh start" back in town. Maybe they intended to return later, but never got around to it; maybe lots of things. As far as we know, only one returned to thank Jesus, and he had been despised not only as a leper, but as a Samaritan, a foreigner as well! And his gratitude was anything but superficial! When he realized he was healed, he "praised God with a shout" for the world to hear! (How uncongregational that must have been!) And when he found Jesus, he flung himself to the ground at Jesus' feet and thanked him.

Lest we be tempted to boast that's our spirit, too, that we're not really like the nine, at least we have the manners to show gratitude, in all honesty most of us will confess that at times we do take others for granted, at times we don't express our gratitude for kindness, even healing, offered us. I have a hunch that, if we're honest with ourselves, we all could confess that shortcoming, perhaps more frequently than we'd like to admit. I know it's true of me. Today, however, we'll focus on the one who did give thanks, the wealth in his spirit of gratitude, a basic theme of both Old Testament and New.

For one thing, we see in him that gratitude is entirely voluntary. No one can force us to be thankful in our heart. It's in no state law; it's not one of the Ten Commandments. Gratitude is neither inherited nor imposed. It's an attitude, a quality of life we freely choose to have or not. It's up to you and me - in the response we choose to make to others, to life itself, and the Source of that life.

Our Pilgrim forebears certainly didn't have to be thankful. A modern realist back in 1621 might have been far more cynical of God's promises and blessings than were those first colonists! After all, they were hardly embarrassed with riches. They struggled to survive. At one point there were only seven healthy colonists, the others sick or dying. Little reason for gratitude there! Yet survive they did. And they chose to be grateful. Surely that beat bitterness, for in that gratitude, they confessed the presence of a Strength, a Goodness beyond themselves that had sustained them through terrible times. And it gave them courage to face the future, not with despair and forboding, but with faith and conviction - that in them, in some way, the purposes of God might be fulfilled.

In this sense, gratitude is not a superficial response; it comes from the spirit within that defines who we really are, shaping the very lives we live. Sometimes we have to search out that spirit, listening for insight from beyond our common thoughts and assumptions.

There's an old story of a New England farmer who decided to sell his farm. His broker, wanting to know its best selling points, toured the buildings and fields and took pictures. After she had prepared the listing, she returned to check it out with the farmer. She read it to him; he listened carefully, then asked her to read it again. She did. The farmer pondered silently a few moments, then announced, "Changed my mind about selling. You know, I've been wanting a farm like that all my life!" When we allow ourselves to reflect on our blessings, that "attitude of gratitude" may bless us, too!

Take it a step further. An attitude of gratitude is much more than a sweet sentiment. It deals with more than the things we're fortunate to have, the toys we enjoy. At a deeper level, it acknowledges and gives thanks for each other, for the persons in our lives. That's exactly what the Samaritan leper realized - that in Jesus someone actually valued him, cared enough to touch his life! It's me saying to you, "I really appreciate who you are, all that you mean to me, all you've done for me!" Without this, we'd isolate ourselves in our private, self-serving orbits far apart from one another. What a depressing prospect!

It's interesting that therapists often counsel depressed patients to think of persons who've been good to them at some point in their lives and to write them letters of thanks. Persons who can reestablish relationships based on gratitude often discover new value both in themselves and others. That suggests

simple, practical everyday therapy for all of us: simply make a spontaneous phone call or write a short note to someone just to say "thanks." That's bound to bring sparkle to both receiver and giver. Try it: you may like it!

The nine former lepers never gave thanks: their lives were undoubtedly the emptier for it. The tenth who did received what the others never found - a relationship with his healer, Jesus, and the blessing that brought into his life. Not long ago I visited a friend who'd known terrible reverses and faced a bleak future. For awhile she was angry, then despairing; then she came to terms with life and could say, "I accept my situation, and I can be thankful for so many little things!" That attitude of gratitude is going to give her strength to face whatever the future might bring. Surely a gift of grace!

That same gratitude for someone, for blessings modest and great, for life itself, can lead us to sing with the psalmist our praise to God:

"It is good to give thanks to the Lord,
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;...
For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work;
at the works of your hands I sing for joy!"
(Psalm 92:1,4)

Amen.