

October 14, 2007
Micah 6:6-8, Luke 17:11-19
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“A Grateful Heart”

Going away to college for the first time can be a real awakening. Of course, it is an opportunity to entertain new ideas and have fresh experiences. It can also be a time to be awakened to much more mundane realities. When I went away to college, it didn't take long before I was pondering such mysteries as: How did the dirty laundry pile up so quickly in each corner of the room? How did all these dust bunnies that blow about like so much tumbleweed get into my room? Could I get away with wearing this shirt with the ketchup stain for the third time if I keep on my sweater? Where are my parents when I really need to talk with them? Let's just say that the first weekend I went home to visit my parents, I had a new appreciation for them and for all they had done for me.

It is so easy to take the important things in life for granted. We not only take our family and our friends for granted, but we often take the gifts of God for granted. When we rise in the morning and give thanks for a new day, do we really pause to think about all the things that work together to make a new day? Each day we awaken to the light of the sun, the atmosphere that protects us, the water that sustains life and the soil that produces an abundance of grain, fruits and vegetables. There are people who harvest the grain, mill the flour, produce, package and distribute the bread. There are the natural resources of the earth that we use to make our clothes, our machines, our homes and our cities. Without the goodness of God and the abundance of the earth, there would be nothing but darkness and silence. Yes, it is easy to take the essentials of life for granted.

Yet, there are moments when the things and the people we take for granted are suddenly thrown into bold relief and we see their significance in a new way.

This past week I was talking with a friend in Charlotte who was describing the severe drought that region is experiencing. She said that there is grave concern that with all the demand there is not enough water to supply the power plants, homes and industries. Which heavy water users will be restricted first? Which businesses will be closed first? Which new water and sewer hookups are denied? The threat of severe drought makes us appreciate water as a precious natural resource.

While you are waiting for an appointment, you happen to read an article about a new robotic surgical technique. “Interesting article,” you think to yourself. Your reading is interrupted as your name is called for your appointment. Two weeks later, you discover that you are facing surgery and one option is to use the very surgical technique described in the article. Suddenly, the information takes on a whole new level of importance. Two women were good neighbors, but busy schedules kept them from developing a close relationship. Suddenly, Jean's husband died. A profound sense of loneliness enveloped her life like a grey cloud. At her neighbor's insistence, the two of them began to take walks together every day in the early evening. After months of such walks, Jean told her friend, “You may not know it, but your friendship on these walks is the one thing that has kept me sane.”

There are moments when God means more to us than ever before. Jesus and the disciples enter a town between Samaria and Galilee. At the entrance to the town, ten lepers who stand at a great distance cry out to Jesus for mercy. Considered unclean and untouchable, these lepers live on the fringes of society. They have little for which to be thankful. They live off of the charity and leftovers of others. Jesus gives them something they are not expecting. He tells them to show themselves to the priest who has responsibility for declaring the lepers clean. While they are on their way, they realize that Jesus has healed them. One leper, identified by Luke as a Samaritan, turns back, falls at the feet of Jesus and praises God. This outsider, a Samaritan and a leper, finds what he has been seeking and may not even have known what to call it. He finds more than physical healing. He finds God at the center of his life. In a sermon I once heard, Dr. Fred Craddock said, “He found a place to worship.” He found a place to give thanks.

In one sense, you might say that this discovery is the true miracle. He finds the God who has always been there as the foundation of all things and the giver of all things. He finds this God who touches our lives with goodness, grace and healing. There are ten healings that day, but there is only one miracle. Only one soul seems to catch fire; from what we can tell, only one heart is changed. Only one returns to give thanks. The miracle is not so much about a dramatic, unexpected healing as it is about the experience of being awakened to the power and presence of God. A miracle happens when we no longer take God for granted.

Imagine a child playing outdoors with a magnifying glass. She picks up the glass and begins to focus the light of the sun on a leaf that begins to smolder, smoke and catch fire. Then, through the magnifying glass lens, she focuses the light of the sun on her arm. Very quickly she is startled by the burning heat of the sun and drops the glass. She has new respect for the light of the sun.

A miracle happens whenever God, who is everywhere present, becomes focused in our lives like the light through a magnifying glass. Something catches fire in our heart. When we awaken to God, we can no longer sit around unmoved on a sofa, at a desk, in a car, in a hospital bed or even in a pew. An awareness of God's presence compels us to praise and worship God. When a miracle happens we, too, find God at the center of all things. When did you discover God at the center of your life? It is in that moment that we find a way to worship God with our whole lives.

Jesus says to the Samaritan who turns back, "Rise and go on your way, your faith has made you well." The words seem right, but they seem out of place. The man is already healed. Why are these words spoken after the man is healed? The man is kneeling at the feet of Jesus. The word translated "to be made well" means so much more than physical healing. It means to be saved or to be made whole. The Samaritan is made whole – not just physically, but spiritually whole.

His got down to the central business of life, which, in the end of things, isn't business at all. He got down to worship. The Reformers knew that the chief end of human existence is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. The prophet Micah expressed it this way, "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8)

Next Sunday is our Commitment Sunday. It is a time to brush away the clouds that keep us from seeing the light. It is a time to bring our priorities into focus. It is a time to discover the One who is always, everywhere, present in the center of our lives. It is a time to let the light of God catch our souls on fire. It is a time to worship. A grateful heart sees clearly what a conflicted heart, a broken heart or a confused heart cannot easily see. We are broken people who have been made whole by God. We have been mended, body and soul, so that we might dwell in the light of God's presence. If we are to live a healthy life, a whole life, a human life, we turn back to fall at the feet of Jesus and praise God.