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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
October 13, 2013 (Lectionary 28), The 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
2 Kings 5:1-15c; Psalm 111; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holt Spirit. Amen

<sup>15</sup>Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; <sup>16</sup>and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. (Luke 17:15-16)

During his convalescence at home, your pastor has been reading and indexing nearly 30 years of sermons preached by his first Lutheran pastor, the Rev. Raymond Shaheen, of blessed memory. Some of you may remember dear Pastor Shaheen for he visited Immanuel several times to preach or teach. He was one of those special kind of people who made you feel loved from the moment you met him. You might say he oozed love! He also oozed gratitude. I will always remember how he would greet us when he called, he would say, "dear Pastor, I need your help and your understanding!" This wise, loving and far more experienced pastor of the church would say that to Greg and to me – younger, foolish and inexperienced as we were! Another one of his sayings was this: "Great day in the morning!" It was as if each and every day was a special gift – which of course it is!

In any case, Greg found a few sermons based on our text today about the ten lepers, one of whom returned to express his gratitude to Jesus for being healed. In 1960, Raymond preached a sermon called "The Grateful Leper" in which he said:

"I submit to you...that long before the leper met Jesus Christ, the seed of gratitude was being nurtured in his soul. This is the only way, it seems to me, that you can explain the fact that only one out of ten came back to say "thank you" ....for a man is either by nature grateful or ungrateful."  
*(Raymond Shaheen, "The Grateful Leper" September 18, 1960)*

Indeed, it seems that people are inclined to either be grateful or not. Maybe rather than ungrateful the opposite of grateful might be complaining, or suspicious, negative or pessimistic, or nowadays we might say, "entitled!" Some people look at things and see a glass half full; some look and see a glass half-empty. Some people seem to think they deserve everything they have been given – and perhaps even more! They take everything for granted. So we seem to be naturally inclined one way or the other.

However, perhaps this is not just how some people are – or how we all are sometimes and there’s nothing we can do about it. What I want to suggest is that even though we may be inclined to be one way – say pessimistic or negative or entitled in our attitudes – it need not be so. I’m suggesting that we can change! We are not held captive as if we have no choice in the matter – we cannot excuse ourselves by saying, “well, that’s just how I am.” Indeed, we are free to resolve to try to become better at gratitude – we can work on becoming more grateful, like the one leper who came back and fell down at Jesus’ feet to thank him!

I subscribe to a website called [Gratefulness.org](http://Gratefulness.org) which sends out a “Word for the day” each day. I get it every morning and, because it is always very short, I read it every day. It is a gentle reminder to me to be grateful – to practice gratefulness. I believe that, whether or not we are inclined toward gratitude, we can, with intentional practice, get better at it!

Let me describe two people to you as a way of illustrating gratefulness and its opposite.

The first is a woman I know, a woman in her seventies. She is filled with anxiety about many things – her health, her finances, her work, her prayer life, her family, whether or not she has disappointed anyone, and on and on. She talks about all these things incessantly. It becomes a litany of complaints. The thing is – she doesn’t really have health problems, at least nothing unusual for a woman of her age, she doesn’t have financial problems, she is retired and free to do what she likes – free to volunteer to do what she wants to do. In fact, she has much for which she could be grateful but all she does is complain and wring her hands. I guess that is her nature, but she is a woman of faith. And yet, listening to her, you wouldn’t always know it.

The other person I want to describe to you (and I have been given permission to do so) is someone you all know – my husband and your pastor, Gregory. Having been through a major surgery just seven weeks ago, he talks and writes mostly about how blessed he feels! Blessed and filled with gratitude! He is grateful that the problem with his heart was discovered! Grateful that it could be fixed! Grateful that we live in a place where the best doctors and medical care can provide what is needed! He likens his experience in the hospital to a chamber orchestra where every person plays their part and plays it well so that the overall experience is beautiful! He is grateful that so many people have prayed for him and continue to pray for him! He is grateful for the cards and

flowers and visits, and on and on. That is not to say that he doesn't have moments of frustration, but...

What a difference! The seed of gratitude is planted in each and every one of us, but we need to nurture it and water it and feed it and allow it to grow and flourish! Gratitude may not come naturally to us for many reasons having to do with our background and history, and so on. Still, if we think about the life we are given and all the gifts that God gives to us, it is appropriate for us to be grateful – for we deserve none of it! Not even the very next breath that we take – it's all a gift from our gracious Creator and Lord.

In another sermon from 1968, Pastor Shaheen says:

“In my relationships with people..., every now and then I discover a person who says, “I've reached the place in life where I can recognize that the hand of God has been at work in my life. I recognize it now as I have not seen it before, and I shall spend the remaining years of my life living and serving, obeying and thanking him.” Kind friend, it's only sometimes that as we reach a certain place and look back, that we can see how the hand of the Lord has been at work --- not always as we had told him it ought to be --- vain as we are, we can dictate even to God --- but He's been at work. And there might be the miracles of healing going on the like of which you and I never quite recognized.” (*Raymond Shaheen, from “Like a Faith Healer” September 15, 1968*)

That one lone leper came back to thank Jesus. He was a Samaritan. I wonder if it was because he was a Samaritan that he felt free to depart from the others and return to Jesus. The rest probably continued on to the synagogue to be seen by the priest, which is precisely what Jesus had told them to do.

They did nothing wrong, really. They were healed just the same. But it was the Samaritan who took a moment to reflect on his situation and realized that the hand of God was at work in the very words of Jesus. And so he came back to the healer himself and fell down at his feet in worship, giving him thanks.

When we look back over our lives what do we see? What do we choose to see? The good things? The bad things? A random series of events? Can we see the ways in which God has brought blessings out of difficulties and disasters? Can we see the hand of God guiding us and preparing us for things we never thought we could have done? Can we simply see that God has safely brought us to this new day – this new moment?

Maybe we cannot see ahead to what tomorrow will bring, but when we look back with an eye for how we have been led, we can see God at work in us and for us. Others may call it chance or fate, luck or even Karma. But with an intention for gratitude and with trust in God's abundant providence we may be able to see that God has indeed been at work in our lives.

Perhaps that seed of gratitude is planted in us on the day of our baptism – just as the Holy Spirit is poured out upon us. From that day – from that moment – God has made us His own. We are born again into a new life that is inextricably intertwined with Jesus Christ. In a few moments we will witness this extraordinary event once again as little Whitley receives the gift of baptism. Yes, it is a gift – a gift of life – abundant life – eternal life with the One who has given us everything good. Absolutely everything!

And then, we will give thanks – as we do each and every Sunday when we celebrate the Eucharist. Through Baptism we are included in this great meal of thanksgiving. Remembering again where we, as the people of God, have been, we look back and tell the story once more how our Lord has rescued us from sin and death and all the forces of evil by his own dying and rising again – this story becomes our story too. Each and every one who enters this company through baptism is precious to Jesus, including now Whitley, and you and me, and (for some of you what I am about to say will be new and sad news) including our sister-in-the-Lord Sheila Burton who now rests in Him.

So, I say, be like that one leper and come back. Come back again and again to give thanks and praise to the One in whom we all live and move and have our very being. To Him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen