

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7, Psalm 66, Luke 17:11-19
October 9, 2016
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If I had to summarize our reading from the prophet Jeremiah this morning in one sentence, it would be the familiar saying, “Bloom where you are planted.” God’s letter to the Jewish exiles in Babylon does not say to be angry and vengeful toward your captors, or mope around and feel sorry for yourselves. Instead it says to go on with life as usual just as they would if they were still in their beloved homeland. When the letter tells them to pray for Babylon and seek its welfare, God comes very close to saying love your enemy.

Viktor Frankl was one of the more famous holocaust survivors. He wrote Man’s Search for Meaning. In the book he described how

even in the degradation and abject misery of a concentration camp, he was able to exercise the most important freedom of all - the freedom to determine his own attitude and spiritual well-being. No Nazi SS guard was able to take that away from him or control the inner-life of Frankl's soul. One of the ways he found the strength to fight to stay alive and not lose hope was to think of his wife. Frankl clearly saw that it was those who had nothing to live for who died quickest in the concentration camp.

As people of faith, we should know what it is we live for – to give glory to God in thought, word and deed. Regardless of the circumstances we find ourselves in temporarily or for longer periods of time, we aspire to bloom where we are planted. We witness to the love of Christ in our generous giving and humble service. We offer words of hope and encouragement, and we exhibit an attitude of thanksgiving, which leads us directly into our gospel reading for today.

I could talk about the fact that only a Samaritan came back to thank Jesus for his healing, or discuss how horrible lepers were treated in Jesus’ day, but the overall message from this story is clearly about returning thanks to God.

Someone has said that the whole of the Christian life is one big Thank You!

Meister Eckhart said, “If the only prayer you ever say in your whole life is ‘thank you,’ that will be enough.”

Several years ago now my favorite spiritual writer was a Catholic priest, Henri Nouwen. I think I read all his books. One of those books he titled Gracias after he had spent time in Bolivia and Peru. The word he heard over and over while there was: Gracias – thank you. He writes, “I saw thousands of poor and hungry children, I met many young men and women without money, a job, or a decent place to live. I spent long hours with sick, elderly people, and I witnessed more

misery and pain than ever before in my life. But in the midst of it all, that word lifted me again and again to a new realm of seeing and hearing: Gracious! Thanks!"

He goes on to say that even the smallest things: a handshake, a smile, a good word, or an embrace became a new occasion for them to say thank you.

And then he writes, "And slowly I learned. I learned what I must have forgotten somewhere in my busy, well-planned, and very 'useful life.' I learned that everything that is, is freely given by the God of love. All is grace. Light and water, shelter and food, work and free-time, children, parents and grandparents, birth and death – it is all given to us. Why? So that we can say *gracias*, thanks, thanks to God, thanks to each other, thanks to all and everyone."

In our Collect for the Day, we (asked/will ask) that our Lord's grace will always precede and follow us. I would suggest that it always does precede and follow us if we will but acknowledge it.

The story goes that St. Peter was welcoming a new person, Mr. Smith, to heaven. As he was showing him around, they passed a very large building that had only one small window in the door. The man asked about it and Peter just said, "Oh, you don't want to go in there." But the man was curious and went over and looked in through the door. He could see that it was filled with row upon row of white boxes with bows on shelves stacked high to the ceiling. And each one had a name on it.

"Is there one for me?" he asked Peter. "Yes, but you really don't want to open it, trust me," Peter urged. The man was so insistent, however, that Peter finally unlocked the door.

The man rushed in and found the S section and his particular box. When he opened it, it was filled with hundreds of blessings God had given him in his lifetime. His countenance fell when he quickly realized that he had never understood them to be from God nor been the least bit grateful for them.

During a presidential election year, politicians try to win our votes by making us feel discontent and dissatisfied with our lives. We are told that somehow the other candidate or party is cheating us out of things that rightfully should be ours. This suggestion that we should have more of whatever fuels in us a spirit of ingratitude and resentment.

Perhaps we modern Americans are easily persuaded not to give thanks for the abundance of blessings we receive every day because we are so accustomed to having so much.

In her book, The Language of Letting Go, Melody Beattie writes, "Force gratitude until it becomes habitual. Gratitude helps us stop trying to control outcomes. It is the key that unlocks

positive energy in our life. It is the alchemy that turns problems into blessings and the unexpected into gifts.”

About six years ago, I read that if I spent a little time each evening before I went to bed writing down three or four blessings I’d received that day, and did it for a month, it would change my life. It did. For the last six years every night except Sundays, I have sat down in my little prayer room, reviewed the day and verbally listed my thank yous to God. The list almost always starts with the cup of fresh brewed coffee that is waiting for me when I first get up, and ends with gratitude for enough good health to do my evening exercises and express my thanks for one more night.

I challenge everyone if you aren’t already doing it to try it and see if it doesn’t change your life as well. It is said that God has two dwelling places – in heaven and in a grateful heart. AMEN.