

“Thank you very much”

The readings today are tied together by one theme—gratitude. It is an important theme but perhaps it seems mundane. After all, from a young age we learn to say, “Thank you.” Some of us were taught to write thank you notes after receiving a gift, even if we did not like the gift. Some of us are so steeped in the tradition of giving thanks that we thank the cashier in a store after they take our money. As if they were doing us a favor by making us pay for the items.

The scripture passages today give us differing takes on gratitude. They point out situations where gratitude might not be the first posture that one takes. They point out situations that might lead to grumbling, dissatisfaction, even anger. We are poised to give thanks when something good comes our way, even if it is the thought that counts rather than the quality or preference for the gift. Then there are times when the gift is not obvious or at first blush seems like a burden instead of a gift.

The first passage is from the Book of Jeremiah. At this point in his prophesy Jeremiah is speaking to Jewish captives in Babylon. These are people who lost a war with the Babylonians. They have also had their beloved Jerusalem destroyed, including having the Temple ransacked and defiled. They have the shame of all of these losses on their heads, and have been moved to Babylon to serve their captives. They are not happy campers.

But Jeremiah, who had warned them that this would happen, and he was rejected by these people and their leaders. Now he speaks God’s word to them again. This time his words are not prophetic, but conciliatory. He tells them that rather than mope about and long for their homeland as they do in Psalm 137, where they cry out, “How do we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” God through Jeremiah tells them to make the best of the situation. They are to build houses and plant gardens. They are to get married, have children and give those children in marriage. While this might seem all well and good the prophesy goes one step farther. Jeremiah tells them that God wants them to, “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf.” It is one thing to seek prosperity even in adversity, but to also pray for the welfare of the city where you are held captive? That seems like a tall order. Yet, God insists that in the very city of their captivity will they will find welfare.

In the Second Letter to Timothy the writer, masquerading as St. Paul,<sup>1</sup> shares other aspects of gratitude. First of all, the writer points out that while he is chained like a criminal God’s word is not chained. Indeed, he is writing to other followers and sharing encouraging words with them. Those words point

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<sup>1</sup> The majority of scholars agree that this letter was not written by Paul. The word choice and syntax is not Pauline even if certain aspects of the letter remind one of other letters of Paul.

to a level of gratitude that surpasses his situation and theirs. They may be persecuted and ostracized, but they know in their hearts that they are doing as God would have them. He says, "If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him." That is, our lives are a testament to God and living as such we have much to be grateful for in living and reigning with Jesus in eternity.

The Gospel lesson might seem to be the most obvious example of gratitude, but it also vexing. When the lepers cry out to Jesus for mercy he does not offer a cure. He tells them to show themselves to the priests. To get a clean bill of health a leper did not go to a physician, but to the priest. Leprosy was considered a condition of ritual uncleanness, as well as a state of illness. So this group of lepers heads off on a journey to find a priest. Given that they are in the region between Samaria and Galilee it is likely that they would have to travel many miles to find a priest, perhaps all the way to the Temple in Jerusalem. Along the way they find themselves cured. One of the ten lepers turns back to praise God and thank Jesus. As we might expect this person is not a Jew but a Samaritan.

Jesus responds to this Samaritan by asking why the others did not return to give thanks. Given that they were told by Jesus to show themselves to a priest, and that was the only way to be declared ritually pure and cured I have often wondered why Jesus was so critical of them. They were doing just as Jesus told them to do. The answer is gratitude.

Jesus is telling us that our first response to any event, especially one of healing and salvation is gratitude. The human constructs of purity and acceptance are not nearly as important as giving thanks for the gift freely given. Indeed, Jesus goes on to make this clear when he tells the Samaritan that his faith has made him well. The Greek word behind that statement is *sozos*, which can also be translated as salvation or in this case "your faith has saved you." All ten received healing from their leprosy but only the Samaritan who gave thanks and praise for his healing is also given salvation.

As the Psalm 166 indicates, give thanks to the Lord with your whole heart, for it is to be in awe of God that is the beginning of Wisdom. Or as we say in the Eucharistic Prayer, the prayer of Thanksgiving. "It is a right and good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you." Whether we are in a land of exile, imprisoned, or have received healing to give thanks to God is always the first and best response.

To that I say, Thanks be to God.