

“Eleven Cents Worth of Gratitude”

Dr. D. Jay Losher, Jr.

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Luke 17:11-19 = living gratitude

The year was 1995. I was in Dallas, the pastor responsible for the 19 Sudanese refugees my congregation sponsored. All 19 were fleeing the quarter century long civil war in the Sudan. Most of the adult men had been horribly disfigured by torture. Most of the children had been born in refugee camps in Kenya. Every Sunday morning, I drove the church van across Dallas to pick up our Sudanese refugees for worship.



As I pulled up in the van, Esther Mawa, age 6 was the first out. She slips into the van followed by her brother Immanuel and cousin Winnie. They play together for a few moments and then Esther lights from the van and does something extraordinary. She presses 11 pennies into my hand, found change she discovered under the seats. Her face is beaming like she had just won the lottery.



Most folks would not even stoop to pick up a penny, but here Esther is cleaning up the van for me. No one asked her to help out. At first I think this is her offering, yet Esther has no allowance from a family with no income. 11 cents represents a king's ransom for someone who has nothing, but it's much deeper than that.



Esther Mawa knew nothing else her whole life but living in a Kenyan refugee camp under unimaginable conditions and deprivation. Yet somehow the natural helpfulness of children has not been driven out even in those horrendous conditions. 11 cents is only tiny in absolute terms, but Esther's face shown with an almost timeless attitude of grace ~ an expression of gratitude, deep and sincere.

Like every one of Jesus' narratives, parables and miracles there are many layers of meaning. One interpretation of the healing of the ten lepers was



presented at Church of the Pilgrims in DC some years ago.¹ The sermon asked the question: “To whom is gratitude due?” It was a “you are there” dramatic presentation as sermon.

In it 10 lay readers come forward to represent the 10 lepers. Each tells their stories in turn, stories of something in their lives in need of healing ~ griefs, pains, addictions, stress, needing reconciliation. One gets the strong impression each is speaking from the heart about real issues in their lives, not merely reading a script.



The nine readers representing the nine lepers come forward. They are anointed for healing by the preacher representing the priest in the scripture. The priests of Jesus’ day could only confirm a healing. Nine of the readers in a “delirium of joy” promptly forget to even tip their hats in Jesus’ direction, the real source of their healing.

You’ve got to admire the Samaritan for the courage of his convictions, for going against the crowd and the conventional wisdom, and turning back to offer thanks to Jesus. The Samaritan is the only one whose “delirium of joy” becomes an occasion for giving thanks where thanks is due. Yet again, we see Jesus’ theme that the outsider gets the point, while the insiders miss his message completely. But, it is simply too easy to commend the one Samaritan and condemn the nine others.

All 10 should have returned heartfelt thanks to Jesus. It is cynical to say instead: “one out ten ain’t bad. That’s enough, right?” After all a tithe is the Biblical standard for God’s return on a harvest.

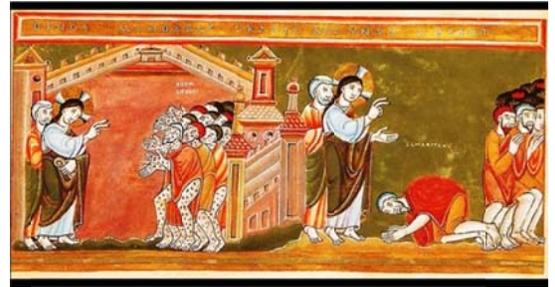


Warren Buffett would be delighted with a 10% return on investment inside of an hour. Billy Graham’s lifetime track record for conversions is only 5% of those attending his crusades and that is considered an almost unbeatable track record.

On the other hand, 10% is below the approximately 20% of congregations in the US which are healthy and growing. 10% is well below the .300 batting average which will get you into and keep you in the majors. It is hard to make sense of this poor return of gratitude.

Then again maybe the 9 shouldn't be faulted.

Perhaps they didn't get it because their healing actually happened after they left Jesus but before they met the priest as Jesus had ordered them. Perhaps they were confused about who was responsible. Maybe the priest did it and gratitude was due him. Yet, confusion over who is responsible is no real excuse for lack of gratitude for God's daily care for us.



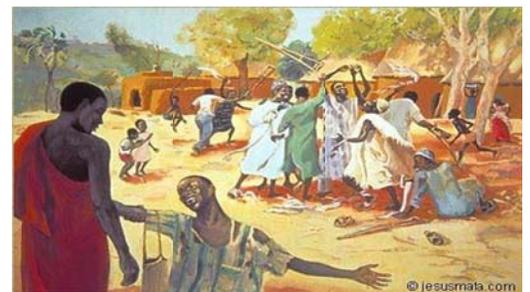
For us as well as the 9 healed lepers, the problem is much deeper than mere confusion. Maybe the 9 lepers lack gratitude because they take God for granted. We do that as well. We ask God to intervene all the time, for restoration, for health, for peace, for family, for help in times of trouble, sometimes even for stuff. How many times do I unthinkingly utter "LORD help me?"



When what we have prayed for comes out the way we desired, how many times do we recognize God's hand in the resolution? Our egos can get in the way. Maybe we too lack gratitude because about 9 out of 10 times that God acts we too take God for granted.

That dramatic sermon presentation at Church of the Pilgrims draws a brightline boundary between the priests' authority merely to confirm a healing and Jesus' actual power to heal.² Give credit where credit is due. Give gratitude where gratitude is due. Give the glory and thanksgiving to God on account of the healing power thru Jesus. Jesus has real authority. Jesus heals. Jesus frees. Jesus saves.

When you hear testimony from folks who do recognize what God is doing in their lives, there is a common theme. They will often tell of God's gracious work in their lives in healing, in opening a door, in preserving through a crisis, in giving a word of guidance at a time of discernment.



The testimony rolls almost immediately from "God is good" "God is great." "God is awesome." "Look what God has done." it rolls almost immediately to "I am now committed to do something about ... it."³ Recognition of God's

love leads inevitably to expressions of gratitude. More than gratitude it leads inextricably to the committing of ourselves, our time, talent and possessions to God's purpose.

The pattern of God's work among us is this: grace and gratitude ~ God's grace shared with us moment by moment in loving compassion, and our response in joy. That's what God wants, desires, longs for from us: A "delirium of joy" at God's love becoming for us a fountain for our expression of gratitude. That's why we come together to worship every Sunday.

Grace
and
Gratitude



How much gratitude is enough? It really does not take much. The Samaritan's turning around to praise the one who actually heals him is enough. Esther Mawa and her 11 cents worth of gratitude, that's more than enough because it's offered with a full and honest heart and an almost beatific smile. That's what God desires from us.

Gratitude like forgiveness is contagious. If we respond to God's gracious provision for us, to God's abundant and steadfast love, to God's only desiring the best for us, if we respond with even 11 cents worth of gratitude, it will plant the seed and grow in others until we are a community of Christ exhibiting God's powerful love to the whole world.

¹ Church of the Pilgrims, Washington, DC worship on 14 October 2007, Jeffrey Krehbiel preaching.

² *Ibid*

³ William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* 10/10/2010, p. 12