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One of the first things we teach our children to say is those two magic words please and thank you. We start teaching them with the hope that they will grow into saying thank you not just automatically but with a deeper felt appreciation for the little and big things of life. After all being thankful is a highly desirable quality. We want that miracle of deep and genuine thanksgiving to occur in our children and grandchildren. However, it seems the older we get saying thank you or expressing gratitude becomes harder. I'm not talking about sending thank you notes or saying the words but I'm talking about being genuinely grateful for all we have.

Why is it so difficult sometimes to give thanks? When people are generous to us we stammer and stutter in a mumbling sort of "thank you". When someone picks up the tab in the restaurant, we feel uncomfortable or humiliated. When people go out of their way to do something nice for us, we sometimes feel embarrassed.

Why is that? I think we like to believe we are totally sufficient unto ourselves and not dependent on anyone and not in anyone's debt. That can easily lead to being lost in ingratitude. However just think of your day and see how many people you are dependent on. Our lives are intertwined with a lot of people we don't even know their names; the mail and newspaper delivery people, the clerks who work in the stores, the garbage collection people - the list goes on and on. Who lives a completely independent life?

I also think we get caught up in the spirit of complaint that is so evident in our society today. Everywhere you go people are complaining. Some people actually believe in accentuating the negative. But if you are happy, well adjusted, thankful, giving, something is wrong with you. No matter where you go there are always people fuming and fretting. That's not to say we don't have things to complain about but when that's all you think about there is hardly room for positive feelings let alone gratitude. We can be so overcome by the spirit of complaining that it is difficult or maybe even impossible to be positive and optimistic about anything.

This pall of gloom that pervades our lives is what makes it so hard to give thanks. Yet, intellectually we know it is giving and thanksgiving that makes life worth living.

In the story for today, Jesus cured ten lepers. After their initial amazement, nine of them – naturally enough – wanted to get on with their lives, make up for lost time. Only one returned to express his gratitude. It was not that he had too, but something inside him made him want to come back and throw himself at Jesus' feet, praising God. And Jesus asked, "Where are the other nine? Were not ten healed? Where are the other nine?"

Where are the other nine? Good question. The interesting thing to me is that although ten lepers were made clean of their disease, really only one, in his giving thanks, was made whole.

That is why I think that being able to give thanks for the many blessings we receive in life is an invitation to live and to live more abundantly. When we don't give thanks for what we have, we get lost in ourselves. When all we do is think about ourselves we cannot be whole. We have to move beyond ourselves to live life in its fullest.

When we get to the bottom line of our lives, we have so much to be thankful for. The psalmists were aware of this. 100 of the psalms speak of thanking God for God's protection and love. When we go through life seeing only the negatives we destroy

ourselves and others. If we just concentrate on the negatives, our lives will be dark. But if we look at the positives, people caring for each other, people putting values and family above insignificant stuff, and putting God into our lives we can realize how much we have been blessed.

Look, every one of us has battle stories. Every one of us has serious problems that seem insurmountable. We can't let these hide the deeper positives of our lives. We can't let the negatives destroy our perspective. We have been blessed by God in many ways. We need to thank God for these blessings.

There's a story about a man by the name of Pastor Rinkhart. He was pastor of one congregation for thirty years in a church in Prussia from 1619 to 1649, during the Thirty Years War in Europe. From the year the war began until the year the war ended, he was the pastor in the same walled city. His was a walled town, so all the refugees from the thirty years war flocked into his city to find safety inside the city walls as the battles raged around them. His town was overrun with poverty, the plague, and all the perils of war. It was awful. It was hell on earth. By the end of the thirty years war, he was the only pastor left in town alive; all the other pastors had died, so he alone had to bury the plagued villagers and refugees from war. Somewhere in the middle of all of that suffering, he wrote a hymn, which is perhaps the second greatest hymn of the Reformation. You know it well and we sing it at least once a year in the fall. "Now, thank we all our God; with hearts and hands and voices; who wondrous things hath done; in whom this world rejoices. Who from our mother's arms, has blessed us on our way, with countless gifts of love and still is ours today." Incredible. What an incredible sense of thanksgiving in the midst of all that suffering lie in the human heart. How beautiful are hearts filled with genuine thanksgiving.

Paul had the same prescription when he said, "Always give thanks for all things to the Lord your God". Think of how drab life would be for a person lost in ingratitude. Every sunset is colorless; every meal is bland and tasteless; every relationship is soured. Ingratitude stops prayer, represses joy, and misdirects energy. In other words ingratitude sucks the life out of us. Just think of all the things that you enjoy in life that you have never really earned. Just walk outside and experience God's creation.

So you see, the nine people who did not return to give thanks to Jesus, may have been healed of their leprosy but they missed out on the best part of the experience- the opportunity to embrace their gratitude and make their life much richer. In World War II, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his Letters and Papers from Prison that he relied on letters from his family and friends for any contact with the outside world and for any bit of news on what was happening at the time:

"It's a strange feeling to be so utterly dependent on the help of others, but at least it teaches one to be grateful, a lesson I hope we shall never forget. In normal life we hardly realize how much more we receive than we give, and life cannot be rich without such gratitude. It is easy to overestimate the importance of our own achievements compared to what we owe to the help of others"

Life cannot be rich without such gratitude. Our lives cannot be "whole" without it. The Gospel this morning is an invitation to join with the leper in giving thanks. It is also an invitation to be made whole - to discover life in its fullness. It is truly an invitation to live. Because the greatest miracle is not to be healed of leprosy or cancer or coronaries; the greatest miracle is when the human heart is healed of ingratitude, so the human heart is

then filled with daily thanksgivingto God and others..... for God's countless gifts of love. So, our prayer is for God to heal our hearts of ingratitude so we can truly give thanks to God. For it is when we truly give thanks that we know what it is to really live. Amen.