

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa**  
**October 13, 2019 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Readings: Psalm 100**  
**Luke 17:11-19**

**Sermon: Thanksgiving “as if” (Thanksgiving Sunday)**

A story from the Hindu tradition, where they believe enlightenment is the fulfilment of all our lives, which have been reincarnated:

*A guru was sitting with two disciples under a sprawling banyan tree in India. The older student inquired, "Guruji, how long must I wait until I realize God?"*

*The teacher responded, "Enlightenment is not something that can be predicted, but since you have asked," he leaned over and whispered in the disciples' right ear, "it will be twenty more lives."*

*"Oh, no!" the youth cried in dismay, "I don't know if I can wait that long!"*

*The other follower, naturally curious, asked of his own future. The guru whispered, "Liberation will come after you live as many lives as this banyan has leaves – which is many many more than 20!"*

*Hearing this, however, the seeker jumped to his feet and began to dance. Why? He thought he would never reach enlightenment, he would never come close to God. The assurance that he be liberated gave him such great joy –that he danced his thanksgiving to God.*

*Ecstatic with that gratitude the disciple transcended his own suffering. God saw his dance and the thankful one attained his Liberation that very moment.*  
*(<https://www.hinduismtoday.com/>)*

While we as Christians believe more in resurrection than reincarnation, I think we can all learn something from that tale. The image of someone who is so down on themselves, that even the smallest hope of liberation – even if it only comes after a long, long road through suffering – even just a glimpse of God's love makes them dance with gratitude. AS IF salvation has already come to them. And then the liberation becomes real.

It's Thanksgiving "as if". I'm not talking about making something unreal into something real. I'm talking about how thanksgiving makes our hope real.

Throughout the world's religions, thanksgiving somehow always plays a central role. I believe it's one of the most distorted perceptions of religious life: The misunderstanding that we only pray because we want something. And if we don't get what we want, then somehow it disproves God's love for us, or the effectiveness of the worship, or even the very existence of God.

Indeed we do name our concerns to God in prayer. We hand our worries and our fears to God because we cannot deal with them alone.

But worship, and prayer, and meditation, and even the sermon – they always begin with thanksgiving. Thanksgiving to God for giving us life. For the capacity to love. To be creative. To care for one another. To imagine a Spiritual presence as part of our lives, so that we can live with hope and generosity and justice.

In the gospel story today, Jesus made an amazing statement when he said: “Your faith has made you well.”

There’s about a dozen sermons in those six words. “Your faith has made you well.” Today I want to concentrate on the word “faith”. That is what the guru gave the disciple who danced in thanksgiving. In Greek, the root is *pistis*, it can mean everything from belief to reliability to steadfastness to trust. It even means the commitment to carry something a long, long way. Which is a pretty good image for faith, I think.

Here’s a fun fact about biblical translation: When Luke wrote the word *pistis* – it was translated into English as faith. When **John** wrote the word *pistis*, it was translated as belief.

Many people think that faith means having certain beliefs: “I believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth...” – that’s what it says at the beginning of the Nicene Creed, possibly the oldest creed of the Christian Church and once the “test” to demonstrate that you belonged in the Christian church. There were many who spoke the “words”, however, and who defended those statements – but they were not necessarily the best examples of what it means to be faith-full.

At least not in the way that **Luke** portrays faith. Today’s gospel reading is a good example.

The only healed leper who came back to praise Jesus is a **Samaritan**. A Samaritan who (theoretically) did NOT have the right beliefs. At that time, he would have been outside – a long way outside – the circle of those whom Jesus’ peers would have called “the faithful.” According to Jesus’ own tradition, the Samaritans did not have “correct” beliefs. They did not subscribe to the same doctrine as Judeans and Galileans did. They did not worship at the temple in Jerusalem, or pay the temple taxes, or follow the same dietary rules.

Even Jesus seemed surprised to find that the only one who took the time to offer thanksgiving was, in fact, the only Samaritan. The one whose beliefs were supposedly wrong. However, it was the that same Samaritan who went back to thank Jesus - even before telling his own family and friends.

Jesus didn’t take him to task for where he worshipped or how he worshipped or what name he used for God. Instead Jesus simply said: “Your faith has made you well.”

Your faith – not your beliefs.

Because pistis, in its earliest Christian context, really means TRUST. What we have today in the gospel of Luke is a story about trust. A trust that we can actually see because the Samaritan demonstrated it with thanksgiving.

The ten healed men in the story were ALL lepers. As lepers, it didn't matter if they were Samaritan, Judean or Galilean, peasants or princes. Once infected with leprosy, **that** became their identity. Normally Samaritans and Jews did not spend time together – they considered each other unclean and spiritually contagious. But as lepers, it really didn't matter what their heritage or beliefs – with mixed up socio-economic backgrounds and ethnic heritage, they travelled in a pack, because now they were all together, all equally despised on the bottom rung of the social ladder.

To find that stigma eradicated, then, was true liberation.

In the year 2000, the World Health Organization announced that, with all our modern medicine and antibiotics, global leprosy has been effectively eradicated. Thank God!

Yet, we still have our own “lepers” – don't we? We still have those people who are longing for wholeness, but who are pushed to the side by society, who are disenfranchised from work and community and neighbours, all because they live with our own modern “leprosy” – the stigma of physical illness, mental illness, disability, poverty, unemployment, ... the list goes on and on. They feel isolated, powerless, voiceless – like the lepers of Jesus' day.

Jesus stepped into that reality of isolation and he pushed back all of the questions and criticisms, the causes and conditions. Jesus cleared a space for faith, for trust, for relationship, for connection, and for relief amongst those who have carried a burden a long, long way by themselves.

Jesus didn't separate the sheep from the goats, or the right from the wrong, or the clean from the unclean, or the saints from the sinners. Jesus simply waded into the crowd and invited them to trust him, to seize their own wellness, and to show it to others.

He only asked them to live **as if** they believed they were healed, **as if** they trusted his words implicitly.

For that the Samaritan gave thanks.

He did it with his words and his presence. I like to imagine the other nine expressed their thanks in other ways:

By reaching out to other lepers. By feeding the hungry. By living a life of faith that did not build walls. By praying. By teaching thanksgiving with others. By dancing.

When we make the conscious decision to live and choose and act in accordance with God's compassion, then we make another step to being God's kingdom. Even if we are feeling completely overwhelmed by guilt or the weight and injustice of our former lives – the trick is to move one step closer to being healed. We have to leave behind what we know and trust that our faith can make us well.

Because

Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend.

(quote: Melody Beattie)

Thanks be to God. Amen