

The Most Powerful Spiritual Practice – Ever!

1. Warm-up question: What's your favorite Thanksgiving food?
2. On Sunday we completed our November mini-series called "How to Keep Your Sanity in a Mad, Mad World" by talking the stress of all life's mishaps, disappointments, and problems and how the spiritual practice of gratitude can help us not get overwhelmed by all that negativity. What are some problems or negative thoughts that are at the forefront of your mind these days?
3. I Thessalonians 5:18 says, "In all things give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Again and again, the Bible exhorts us to give thanks. That's not because God somehow needs our praise. So why is gratitude so important? Our Gospel lesson addresses that question. Read Luke 17:11-19, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. In Jesus' time, leprosy was a deadly disease that caused your flesh to slowly rot away. Lepers would be forced from their homes and their village to live outside of town often with other lepers. If someone approached, they were required to call out, "Unclean! Unclean!" Imagine yourself in that situation. What would you be feeling and thinking?
 - b. When you recovered from leprosy, if you recovered, you had to be inspected by the priest who would certify that you had no more signs of leprosy. When Jesus told the lepers, while still infected, to go show themselves to the priest, what do you suppose they thought? Why did they go? How do you think they felt when, on their way, they discovered their leprosy was suddenly gone?
 - c. Only one leper returned to give thanks. Why do you suppose the others didn't?
4. Our Gospel story highlights that the leper who returned to give thanks was a Samaritan. The Samaritans lived in a region of Israel once colonized by the Assyrians. When the Assyrians invaded, many Jews intermarried with the Assyrians, creating a new hybrid ethnicity that also developed their own unique religious practices, some drawn from Judaism, some not. As a result, most Jews despised the Samaritans, viewing them as "half-breed heretics" who were poisoning the blood of their people and corrupting their religion. The idea that a Samaritan was the spiritual hero in our Gospel story would have been very provocative in Jesus' culture – just as provocative as if we were to tell a story in our culture today where the spiritual hero is an undocumented immigrant or, better yet, a transgender person.
 - a. It seems like every culture has certain people they target for hate and exclusion. Why? What is it about human nature that causes us to do that?
 - b. Jeff said he's confident that Jesus stands with transgender people, not just because he always stood up for outcasts, but also because of what Jesus specifically said in Matthew 19:12. There Jesus refers to "eunuchs who have been so from birth."

The Jewish Talmud offers insight into that term meant in Jesus' culture. In the Talmud, Rabbi Eliezer says he believes natural eunuchs, *i.e.*, born eunuchs, could be "healed." Another passage in the Talmud lists the warning signs that a man might be a born eunuch. The signs included absence of a beard, softness of hair, smoothness of skin, a high pitched voice, a body that does not steam when bathing in winter, lateness of pubic hair, and men who didn't pee with enough force to make it arch. In other words, born eunuchs were gender fluid men – what we today would call nonbinary or gender queer or transgender. In verse 11, Jesus indicates that being a born eunuch was/is a gift. He says that being a born eunuch is something "given" by God. Clearly, Jesus was way ahead of his time. As you take all this in, what are your thoughts or feelings?

- c. Why do you think transgender people are so feared and targeted in our culture?
 - d. Since Jesus stood with the outcasts, so should we. We're about to do a citywide billboard campaign that will challenge negative religious attitudes toward transgender people. How do you feel about our upcoming billboard campaign?
5. But now, back to the other key point in our Gospel story – the importance of gratitude. In verse 19, Jesus told the Samaritan, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." Earlier we were told that all of the lepers were healed, but what Jesus says in verse 19 suggests that, because of his gratitude, the Samaritan experienced a healing that was more thorough and encompassing. Why? Because wellness is not just about the body, but also about mind and soul.
- a. Many scientific studies have documented the physical and mental benefits that accrue to people who regularly practice gratitude. One study indicated that people who can see the good even in bad situations have a 50% greater chance of living to age 85. Why do you think gratitude is so helpful to our health?
 - b. According to the Laboratory of Neuro Imaging, the typical person has 70,000 thoughts a day and more than half those thoughts are negative. Does that surprise you? What are some practical ways we can train our brain to be more aware of, and thankful for, our blessings?
 - c. Jeff shared several stories about the power of gratitude, including the story about a girl who lost half her leg, but exclaimed, "Look how much I have left!" He also told about Dr. King Sr.'s insistence that there's "always something left worth giving thanks for." Tell us something difficult you're facing right now and something you're thankful for even in the midst of that hard situation.
 - d. Generally speaking, what are a couple things you're most thankful for this Thanksgiving season?
 - e. Expressing gratitude to others is also very powerful, for us and them. Who's someone you want to express more gratitude for? Why are you so grateful?

