



## A Journey Interrupted

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Luke 17:11-19

October 15, 2017

I'm always a bit taken aback when I greet my friend Veronica with a standard, "Hi, how are you doing?" and she replies, "I'm blessed." I'm taken aback not because I doubt her response, but because it's so different from my own frequent answer, which is "Mostly good." Think about what very different sorts of conversation these two greetings invite. In response to Veronica's "I'm blessed," one might ask about the blessings for which she is most grateful. "Mostly good," on the other hand, invites a question about what's wrong and, in return, some low-level complaints about knee pain, a poor night's sleep, or whatever minor annoyance might be on my mind at the moment. I'm working on upping my game to be more like Veronica's. I envy her "I'm blessed" attitude. She's a normal person, who has just as many problems and frustrations as the rest of us, but with every greeting she acknowledges God's goodness in her life. In so doing, she embodies a spiritual maturity to which the good Lord invites us all to aspire.

I'm blessed. These are the words of someone whose mind and heart are focused on gratitude. That's a difficult focus to maintain in our world. The popular cultures of news and entertainment are more likely to stoke our resentment, hostility, and selfishness than they are to nurture gratitude. And yet it is to gratitude that this text and this stewardship season invite us.

As our text opens, Luke tells us that Jesus is traveling between Samaria and Galilee on his way to Jerusalem. He has reached the outskirts of a village. Luke puts Jesus in an interesting place: Jesus is simultaneously someplace and no place. He is dislocated from the traditional site of his ministry in Galilee. He is in this in-between, interim, transitional space. At a distance 10 lepers cry out to him and ask for mercy.

These men are not passing through. They are stuck where they are. They've been quarantined. Their friends and family have removed them from everyday society, because these 10 men had some disfiguring skin ailment that other people were afraid of catching. They've been forced to live separately, in their own little ghetto, and as our story opens, the likelihood is that where they are now living is where they are going to die. They're stuck in place. They are stuck, that is, until they get Jesus' attention.

You heard the story read earlier. Jesus sends them to the priest, as the religious law commands. In response to his suggestion, these 10 men find the courage to leave their confinement and enter that in-between space with Jesus. As they go their way, they are healed. They are freed to be whole again, freed to be restored not just to their bodies, but also to their homes and community. Nine of them take off like a shot the moment they realize they are healed. I imagine they are headed home.

But one man, who is the focal point of this story, returns. He falls on his face, thanks Jesus, and praises God for return and restoration. He makes a deliberate choice to interrupt his journey home and give voice to joy and gratitude.

Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast, who is known around the world for his teachings about gratitude, says that stopping, interrupting our journey is the first step in finding gratitude.<sup>1</sup> Stopping can be a challenge for those of us who tend to rush through life, or who fill our days and minutes with the unrelenting noise of media. Stopping is a challenge for those of us who are overloaded, overworked, over-burdened. But if we want to live gratefully, stopping is the first step we need to take. Sometimes we need to be intentional about it. Steindl-Rast suggests we need to put stop signs into our lives, and remind ourselves to take a deep breath. But stopping is just the first step in discovering gratitude.

The second step is looking. Use your eyes; use your ears; use the senses you've been given and perceive the gift of this moment. One leper does this in Luke's story. He not only stops, but he also looks, and he realizes what he's been given by God in the person of Jesus Christ. This man's life has been restored and redeemed in ways he had never imagined possible. He's been blessed. And as he takes time to stop and realize that, he is filled with gladness.

Then Jesus encourages the man to take what Steindl-Rast says is the final step of gratitude: action. "Get up and go on your way," says Jesus. "Your faith has made you well."

Stop. Look. Go. Learning to live gratefully can be as easy as learning to cross the street. Mastering either one, however – gratitude or crossing the street - requires practice and intentionality.

That is one thing that our annual stewardship season affords each one of us: an opportunity to practice and be intentional about honing our skills of gratitude. This is, indeed, a chance for us to stop, to look, and then to take action.

You have, by now, received stewardship mailings, or you've found a pledge card tucked into the connection pad, or, if you are visiting us for the first time, you've seen the announcement in the bulletin about our annual stewardship campaign. It is a bold one. We seek a substantial increase in pledges to support the work of this congregation. I hope each of you will take time to stop in the midst of all your busy-ness, and look around to see what God is doing not only at First United but also in your own life.

Look around. We burst at the seams with programming for children and youth, because as a congregation we are committed to ministry that nurtures young lives, and forms faith, and supports families. Our commitments do not stop there. On Wednesday, I had a personal tour of the OPRF food pantry, which is one of several of our vital mission partners that serve our

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<sup>1</sup> See *Want to be happy? Be grateful*, a TED Talk by David Steindl-Rast.

[https://www.ted.com/talks/david\\_steindl\\_rast\\_want\\_to\\_be\\_happy\\_be\\_grateful/up-next](https://www.ted.com/talks/david_steindl_rast_want_to_be_happy_be_grateful/up-next)  
I learned of Steindl-Rast and his work from a sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Anne B. Epling on November 13, 2016.

neighbors in need. We wage peace from the streets of Chicago to the battle fields of Syria. And we do much more. Look around. We have a vibrant and critical ministry. We care for one another with prayer shawls and PAL notes and fellowship groups. This church makes a difference in people's lives; it is a place where many people encounter the love of God and the transforming grace of Jesus Christ.

God, of course, does not confine himself to the walls of the church. We have each encountered grace upon grace throughout our lives. If we stop, and look, each one of us likely recognizes that we have much for which to be grateful. We truly do.

Stewardship season gives us an opportunity to go and do something about our gratitude. I hope that, if you have not already done so, you will take time to consider God's blessings in your life, embodied here and outside the church, and consider how you might express your gratitude through the contributions you make. Contributions come in many shapes and forms: your worship and prayers, your volunteer hours and efforts, your ideas and opinions, and, of course, your financial offerings. Please consider how you might contribute, and, if you are able, please make a financial pledge.

Garrison Keillor tells a great story about giving. It begins when Clarence Bunsen stepped into a cold shower one Sunday morning and all of a sudden, his chest felt like it was about to explode. As the rest of his life passed before his eyes, the pain diminished. It wasn't a heart attack, after all, but he'd had a big scare, and he thought about it all morning. He hemmed and hawed about going to church, but then his wife was all dressed and ready, so he went. He was preoccupied during worship, so he didn't pay much attention, and all of a sudden, it was time for the offering. When Clarence took out his wallet, he found he was out of cash. So, writes Keillor,

He got out a pen and hid the checkbook in his Bible (next to Psalm 101) and quietly scratched out a check for \$30, more than usual, because he had almost had a heart attack and also because his offering was personalized. He wrote surreptitiously, trying to keep his eyes up and ahead – knowing you're not supposed to write checks in church, it isn't a grocery store.

He glanced to his right, and Mrs. Val Tollefson was glaring at him. She thought he was writing in the Bible. Meanwhile. . . Clarence tried to tear the check quietly out of his checkbook. There's no worse sound in the sanctuary than a check ripping. His check wouldn't come quietly, the first half-inch rip sounded like plywood being torn from a wall, so he waited until. . . they said the Lord's Prayer. . . . when Elmer passed the basket, Clarence laid down the check folded neatly in half in the basket and bowed his head and suddenly realized he'd written it for \$300.

He had written with his eyes averted and he knew he had written three-zero-zero on the short line and three-zero-zero on the long line. Could a man sneak downstairs after church and find the deacons counting the collection and say, "Fellows, there's been a mistake? I gave more than I really wanted to?" He now felt fully alive for the first time all day. He felt

terrifically awake. He had given all he had in the checking account and a little more. What would they do until the end of the month?<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes we lose our heads over the gladness of it all. Sometimes we are overwhelmed by the sense of how good and precious our lives are. Sometimes we know that God is the author of this goodness. And we have to share that with someone; the news is too good to keep to ourselves. Gratitude just comes welling out of us, without our planning it. We give, in word and deed, in talent and treasure, sometimes more than we intended, because we know that God deserves all we have, and more. This is Clarence Bunsen's story. It's also the story of the man healed of his leprosy. I'd like to suggest that it's our story, too.

Some of us have had false alarms, after which we were filled with joy and relief. We have been given children. We have been loved by people we cherish. We have work that matters. Some of us have seen the deserts of our lives flower, and discovered grace in the most unlikely of places. We have been filled with faith, loved by God beyond our deserving. How are we? We're blessed.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Garrison Keillor. "Collection" in *Leaving Home*, pp. 87-91 (New York: Penguin Books, 1989).