Dr. Suzanne Allen

First UMC

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Series: The Gratitude Path

Message: “Growing a Life of Gratitude”

As a way of preparing for the holiday of Thanksgiving, we have been considering what it looks like to follow Jesus down the path of gratitude rather than to follow the world down the path of scarcity.

When we follow Jesus, we find that the path of gratitude leads to the garden of abundance. And we are invited to spend time there, counting our blessings which leads to a harvest of generosity. We realize what gifts we have to share.

As we walk down this path, following these steps, we find that this experience changes us profoundly. The practice of trusting God and giving thanks in all things and the choice to count our blessings rather than our complaints changes how we see things, how we thing, and what we pay attention to in life around us. It changes our level of expectation about what is possible.

This week as I was waiting for an appointment and the office had the radio on. On this station they were running one of those trivia questions that you call in to give the answer. The question was, “What does the average person do 22 times per day?” The answer, complain.

That’s a lot of complaining. Hopefully we fall below average on that one.

So often the things that we focus our attention on each day are the negative and they lead to complaining. But when we walk on the path of gratitude, we are choosing to see the world differently, through the eyes of faith. We focus on the positive, where and how God is working in the world and our lives.

I wonder if we could make it our goal, as average Christians, to praise God 22 times per day. Or maybe even 66? When I worked at Camp Wesley our rule was that if you put someone down, you had to say three nice things about them. What if we looked for 22 or 66 miracles around us each day to give thanks to God for?

Following Jesus down the path of gratitude leads us to a place where we live with this sort of expectation that God is working in powerful and miraculous ways all around us.

Albert Einstein put is this way, “Either everything is a miracle or nothing is.”

Elizabeth Barrett Browning said, “Earth’s crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God: But only he who sees, takes off his shoes—the rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.”

Our scripture today is the story of the healing of the 10 lepers. We used this story in Children’s Church this month as a way of talking about being thankful and remembering to say thank you. But as I taught from it this time, I began to think more about healing and how often we divide healing into two categories: the healing that takes place in an ordinary expected way, and the healing that takes place beyond the ordinary, in a way that we do not expect. Yet maybe all healing is from God and we should really consider it a miracle. We catch a cold or the flu and it feels like it will go on forever, and yet one day we wake up and it’s gone. We get a cut or a broken bone or have surgery but it doesn’t stay that way forever, we heal.

It’s a miraculous thing that God made our bodies with the ability to heal. And not just our bodies, but our minds and all of creation. Sometimes we work in tandem with God, and we heal even faster. Sometimes we or other things come along that slow the process down. And then we pray for an extraordinary miracle. But when we stop and think about it, this healing that goes on within us each day is a miracle, a gift from God. And when we can’t see the extraordinary miracle we ask for in this life, what we often forget is that the miracle is taking place in an eternal way. We enter a place of perfect love, beauty, and eternal life with God through the grace of Jesus. And then we realize, even as we see it so clearly in Jesus that God’s nature is healing. Jesus, brings about physical and spiritual healing, often now, but always in eternity.

Talking about miracles can be a little tricky, especially when we get into the area of extraordinary miracles. But as I thought about this story of the 10 men being healed and thinking about the garden of abundance and the harvest of generosity, I started thinking about farmers. I think they might be able to help us when it comes to thinking about miracles. You have to have faith to be a farmer. As a farmer you only have control over your part of the harvest. You choose the right location for your field, you make sure you have good soil and seed, you plant and harvest at the right time, you water and fertilize and weed. And then you wait to see what happens. You pray for the right balance of rain, sun, temperature, etc. Sometimes you can do everything right and you don’t have a very good harvest. Sometimes you are a slack on your side, but nature helps you out and you have a good harvest anyway. And then every once in a while, everything comes together perfectly and you have a bumper crop. You don’t know exactly why, but you are thankful. And that harvest gives you the hope and the bank account to keep going. The one think you know is that you have to keep doing your part. If you don’t plant the seed in faith, there is no chance of a bumper crop, or much of any crop at all.

Extraordinary miracles are like that. We don’t understand them. But we know they do happen and that gives us hope. All we know for certain is that we can do our part to ask in faith, to live in hope, and to give thanks in all things, trusting that God’s nature is to heal in this life and especially for eternity. Our scripture today is a reminder that God does want to heal us, that all of creation is set up to move toward healing, and that God does heal us even today.

We find these 10 men with leprosy living with this sort of expectation. Despite the fact that they were unclean, outcast, excluded from life in society and suffering with wounds that would not heal, they saw Jesus and they did their part. They cried out to him, "Master, have pity on us.” They didn’t even specify what they hoped for. Their words, however, showed their confident expectation that he could help them.

Today I want to invite you to put yourself in the place of these men. What is it that you need to ask Jesus for? Where in your life do you need healing? Are you willing to do your part and then to admit that you need God to do the rest? Admitting that we can’t do it on our own is part of expecting a miracle.

Jesus responds to these men telling them to go and show themselves to the priest. And off they go, following his directions. They don’t ask a lot of questions, they don’t challenge Jesus suggesting that they haven’t been healed yet. Instead, they go. They do their part. And on the way, they are healed. Not right away, but on the way.

Sometimes we want miracles on our terms. But the thing about miracles is that they are not on our terms. Otherwise they would not be miracles. So the question is, are we willing to receive the gift of a miracle according to God’s terms? And, are we willing to hear Jesus’ instructions and follow them? Sometimes they come from Jesus directly, sometimes from the doctor, sometimes from a friend or family member. Often, miracles aren’t right away, but along the way. And so we don’t notice them as much.

Which brings us around to this idea of seeing the world through the eyes of expectation, to expect a miracle. And the way we do that is to train ourselves to see the ordinary, daily miracles around us each day and to give God thanks for them. When we train our hearts and minds to pay attention to the miracles of the moment and to give thanks to God, then we are more likely to do our part and notice the extraordinary miracles that God does as well.

There’s something about gratitude that opens us to greater blessing, joy, and ability to be a part of God’s healing power and presence in this life.

We see this difference in the one man who was healed on the way and turned around and came back to thank Jesus. He is different. He has an insight and awareness into what has happened that the others have missed.

The moment he is healed he turns around, he goes back and thanks Jesus even as he praises God. He is the only one who realizes that Jesus is God, that he is the new priest, the one who embodies God’s healing power for all people.

Because of this awareness, he is healed in a way that goes beyond what the others have experienced. Jesus says, “Your faith has made you well.” He experiences both physical and spiritual healing.

David Lose says he receives a “second blessing” because of his gratitude and his ability to see Jesus and to express his thanks. Lose writes, “Maybe…gratitude is the most powerful emotion. It frees us from fear, releases us from anxiety, emboldens us to do more and dare more than we ever imagined.”

Gratitude opens us up to the miracles taking place all around us, to see the amazing power of God working all around us, to see who Jesus is and to receive the gift of salvation and wholeness.

So today, I invite you to notice the ordinary miracles of God’s healing power around you, to give thanks to God for them. And then to ask for the extraordinary healing you need, listening for Jesus word, and then stepping out in faith, doing your part, trusting that God wants to make us well physically and spiritually, for this life and for eternity.