

The Basis for Gratitude

Scripture: John 4: 7-15

Today's story for the children is written from a kid's perspective. Alexander is articulate at 7, as he whines about the injustice of his day. After all, everything went wrong. The beauty of the book as he regales us with his downward spiral, is that we can smile at this child's misfortunes, and acknowledge that we've all had days when we felt cursed by a string of bad luck.

The Samaritan Woman would have been able to relate to Alexander, too. She's had some terrible, horrible no-good, very bad days herself. After all she is coming to get her water at the well at noon. No one in the Middle East with any choice in the matter chooses to draw water at noon. Its way too hot to be out doing this heavy work. Women did not do errands alone, unless they had no friends. Normally villagers would make this trip with their jugs to fill at dawn when the air is cool.

Jesus sees her with tender appreciation and realizes she has struggled for years. She's guarded, having been burned and bullied before and wary of strangers. She tests Christ and asks him why he is even talking to her, never mind asking for a drink. Everyone knows rabbis don't take water from women, especially from Samaritans, who are long-standing enemies with Jews. She's skeptical and confused. She's not sure she should help this guy at all. Then something changes in her. Suddenly she softens. Where once she'd been jaded, now she's seems grateful. How did she goes from grumbling to grateful and what can we learn here? Let's take a closer look.

In the first place, the story says gratitude is more than being polite. In just a few days people all over this country will be lining sidewalks everywhere telling their costumed offspring to say, "thank you". They will be whispering those words, reminding the children to focus, reviewing the importance of expressing gratitude.

We believe in being grateful. When most of us were growing up our parents urged us to be show gratitude when we got candy at Halloween. We grew up hearing people remind us to write thank you notes after Christmas. Some of us resented that requirement and saw it as a dragline that weighed us down in the Christmas vacation, but we understood our parents were trying to help us learn to show our appreciation. When we urge our children to say 'thank you' it's because we want to help them get in the habit of deciding to be gracious. We want to lay the basis for their character. We want them to be gracious people not just polite when someone's watching.

Gratitude has gotten popular these days. If you put the word into a search engine you get something like 676 million hits – from slogans to articles.

Gratitude is a big theme in our Bible. God tutors the people in gratitude when they grumble about being hungry in the wilderness; God sends enough food for each day so that they won't take this gift for granted but will be grateful every day they get it. David was grateful to have survived every batter where he fought against other armies, and he never failed to thank God. But today I wanted to start the series on gratitude with a story that is not usually mentioned in this context, the story of the Samaritan Woman at the Well. The reason I chose her is because she isn't very polite. She doesn't care what Christ thinks of her. Gratitude does not come easily at first. But when she connects with Jesus her gratitude is genuine. Its honest thanks. That's the only kind of gratitude that matters.

She finds her way to thanksgiving because she is humble. That's my second point the door to gratitude opens from a place of humility. When God splits the Reed Sea Miriam is so grateful, she leads the women in a dance as they scramble up to safety. Her heart is so thankful in part because she was not sure that they would make it. She had been so frightened that she was truly grateful when her people were safe. Fear had humbled her and paved the way for gratitude.

In the chapter before this one there is another man who comes to Jesus. He is wealthy and a leader and he's smart enough to recognize that Jesus is intriguing. He comes to debate the meaning of baptism and ends up walking away. He cannot seem to figure out how to receive the gifts Jesus is offering to people. We know his name because he's important, but Nicodemus is never humble enough to realize that Jesus himself is a gift, and he walks away.

Here in the fourth chapter of John a foreign woman whose name has been lost to history recognizes she's been blessed by Christ's friendship. How? Life's humbled her. This Samaritan Woman has been misunderstood – in her own time and for centuries, since. The Bible says, she had a series of husbands. Now, some people imagine she was a sex worker, but that's not what John's gospel is saying. It was more likely she had a Levirate marriage. Levirate marriage laws came from a place of good intentions and were intended to keep widows from abject poverty. But they could also have cruel repercussions. I imagine that this Samaritan Woman grew up in a family where her parents gave her in marriage to an older man who may have traded livestock for her. But, then her first husband died while she was still young and then his brother had to take her. After that when that brother died, the next brother took her and when he died, she was passed on down through five siblings until the sixth brother took her in but refused to marry her. Through it all its likely that the entire family treated her as a cast-off, a burden, an intruder who always came late to the table and waited on others. She was probably bullied by competing wives, used by their men. How could she help but feel bitter?

So, when she meets Jesus she questions his friendship, she rejects his companionship and is suspicious about why he is even talking to her. Yet mysteriously as they speak, she begins to feel grateful. Gratitude springs up in her like water from a deep well she never saw coming.

How does that happen? He sees her pain. He doesn't blame her for things she cannot control. He treats her like another thirsty traveler. She doesn't have to earn his friendship or do anything to impress him. He's just drawn to her. When she realized Christ wanted to be her friend, she was so grateful, she ran home telling everyone about the man who changed her life.

Finally, our world needs more people who live with grateful hearts. We live in a time when it is easy to become cynical or snide. It's easy to complain about rising prices and changing cultural shifts. In many ways we are like the children who go from place-to-place receiving gifts, while God stands on the sidewalk hoping we will learn to be truly grateful- not just for the good things that happen but for life itself. Gratitude is not about saying "thanks" for the goodies. It's about being grateful for the experience of living, no matter what.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a theologian who taught in Union Seminary in New York City in the 1930's when it became clear that his homeland Germany was becoming consumed by the Nazis and war was on the horizon. He made a surprising choice in 1939, by taking the last ship across the Atlantic from New York home before the waters no longer safe for travel. He returned to his homeland to become part of the religious underground, a dangerous decision that landed him in Nazi concentration camp. In those years he wrote *The Cost of Discipleship*, probably his bestseller.

What he discovered was that it was in the prison camp that his heart was more genuinely grateful than ever. He saw blessings he never noticed in the past. He wrote, “In normal life one is not aware that we always receive infinitely more than we give, and that gratitude is what enriches life.” It’s easy to over-estimate the importance of our own acts and deeds, compared to what we receive from others.

We can all laugh, at little Alexander and slip into grumpy self-pity. We can all appreciate the Samaritan Woman who questioned whether and why Jesus was listening. We can all dismiss gratitude like some new Hallmark stopgap. We can all become jaded. But it’s such a dead-end and takes such a toll. Gratitude springs from the ability to see gifts all around us, no matter what is happening. Where do we find examples of gratitude today – in Ukraine where people refuse to give up and count every victory a blessing. In city schools where teachers are adding extra hours to math lessons to close the learning gap left by the pandemic and feel grateful for their kids’ eagerness to learn. In senior citizens from Milwaukee who stock foodbanks and deliver groceries even when gas is expensive, because they feel blessed to be able to do it.

Gratitude is a quality of character that breeds hope, so we feel inspired each day. Gratitude connects us to the God who believes in us, and even meets us at the well of life, from time to time.

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Susan Cartmell at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin
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