The Power of Gratitude

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 12, 2025; Luke 17:11-19

Two great women died this year. Jane Goodall, that great lover of chimpanzees and the earth, passed away on October 1. And on October 3, Grace Cathedral in San Francisco honored the life of Buddhist teacher and deep ecologist Joanna Macy. In Joanna Macy's first book, *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age,* she talks about the immense power of gratitude. She says gratitude is not just about courtesy or politeness, but that

> [I]n times of turmoil and anger, gratitude helps to steady and ground us. It brings us into presence, and our full presence is perhaps the best offering we can make to our world.. . this present moment is the only time we can act.[1]

I'm speaking about gratitude because it takes such a prominent place in the story about Jesus and the ten lepers from today's gospel reading. This is one of my favorite stories in the gospels about Jesus and the power of healing and the power of gratitude. In it ten lepers, who are treated with disgust by the rest of the world because their disease literally disfigures them and is contagious, approach Jesus from a careful distance and beg

[1] Joanna Macy, *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age*, quoted in Matthew Fox, "Joanna Macy & Jane Goodall: Great Souls, Great Teachers," October 8, 2025, *Daily Meditations with Matthew Fox,* accessed October 12, 2025 at https://dailymeditationswithmatthewfox.org/2025/10/08/joanna-macy-jane-goodall-great-souls-great-teachers/

him to help them. Jesus tells them to go show themselves to the priests and they will be healed. Now I don't know what they thought: if they thought that the main action would happen when they got to the priest, for example. But in the story, one of them notices along the way that he has been healed and he is overcome with emotion and gratitude. And then he turns back. Sometimes I wonder if he turns back partly because he doubts he will be warmly received by the priest since he is a Samaritan, but the story doesn't say that. It just says that he alone of the ten acknowledges the depth of his suffering and his gratitude by turning back and prostrating himself at Jesus' feet and saying thank you from the bottom of his heart. You can feel the moment. It is powerful. And Jesus says, "your faith has made you well." The word for being made well in the Greek is *sozo*, and it means something beyond being cured or even healed. It has the sense of being utterly rescued. Being made whole. Being snatched from the jaws of death and given a second chance where it was not expected or deserved or imagined. You could say that in this story, ten lepers were cured, but only one was fully healed, and it was the power of his enormous, expressed gratitude, gratitude that changed his behavior, that was the wave he rode to that full experience. Gratitude literally gave him his soul back.

There is something that we don't talk about enough here, and that is grace. Grace is the experience that gives rise to gratitude. Grace is the power and love and mercy of God that comes to us when it is least deserved, that can turn our lives around if we let it. Grace is immensely powerful if we can be vulnerable enough to meet it head on. I don't know if the ten lepers felt they deserved to be healed. Surely everyone deserves healing, but just as surely it is obvious many people are not

healed and people die without being made well. What I think is clear is that the Samaritan did not take his healing for granted. Perhaps as a marginalized person he knew better than most that no gift of life can be taken for granted. Perhaps he had no expectation of being able to be embraced fully in society. It seems clear that he felt the grace of his healing as a powerful gift he could not possibly allow to pass by without acknowledging it.

I recently spoke with a person who had a rough childhood, and who as a teenager was full of rage about everything. He got into drugs and lots of fights at school. When he turned eighteen, he fell in with the wrong crowd, and for a variety of reasons ended up serving nearly two years in a maximum security prison. He said he saw the terrible depths of human capacity for violence and evil while he was there, and it came to a head when he himself lost control and beat another inmate nearly to death. In solitary afterward he said he had a raw encounter with himself and God. Did he want to live like an animal, or did he want to learn how to love and become a person who served others above himself? He decided he could not ever allow himself to express violence like that again, and he set goals about who he wanted to be, and met them all. Then he started working harder and achieved new goals. By the time he was in his fifties he had vastly succeeded in life, but he said he had done so by creating a strong box to live in—safe, controlled, but terribly alone. I asked him if he had compassion for himself for the mistakes he made in life. He said he certainly did not, that he deserved the suffering he had experienced. He said he had made life hell for those who loved him for a long time. When I suggested that he did deserve compassion, from himself most of all, he sobbed.

There is something about the experience of mercy, of healing that is offered when it is not expected or deserved, that can give rise to a gratitude powerful enough to change your whole life. Similarly, there is a power in allowing your heart to break, in not holding yourself at arm's length but letting yourself feel the full depth and pain of what is real, that can allow the whole universe to pour through you.[2] We are not meant to stay passive bystanders avoiding this world's grit and drama and beauty and pain. We are meant to be right here in the thick of things, offering mercy where it is not deserved because we ourselves received it first. There is a certain danger in having a life that is too well put together. It is far too easy to be judgmental of others when one's own life is well handled. But if we allow ourselves to be touched with compassion where we are hurt, or where we are imperfect and have made mistakes, we can experience gratitude that has immense power.

Perhaps it takes great suffering to experience that degree of gratitude. Luckily life does provide a decent amount of suffering to us all one way or another, at one point or another. It can be very difficult to show mercy to someone who is suffering deeply, including yourself, because suffering has a way of making people act not at their best. Sometimes suffering is disguised as rage, or criticism, or resentment, or numbness. Jesus met the ten lepers in their condition and offered them the gift of healing. He did not require them to express gratitude. He did not ask whether they deserved healing or not. He did not look into their life histories to see which of them would be the best fit for healing, which would be most

[2] Joanna Macy, ibid.

likely to use their lives for good if they received it. He just offered it because that is what grace does. That is what God is like.

Guilt does not heal people. It can make you change your behavior, and this is helpful. But guilt or shame can never make people whole. Grace and compassion and love make people whole. And gratitude is the natural byproduct of receiving love and letting it cut more deeply to the places we most need it, the places we are the most raw and undeserving. It doesn't work if you keep grace at arm's length. If you don't admit the need for it. If you don't *know* the need for it. But if life has given you the dubious gift of coming face to face with your own capacity for evil or selfishness or failure, then you have the great possibility of encountering the grace of God in that place and emerging from it with a gratitude that can save you from isolation and despair.

My prayer for us all is that we can allow hearts to open more fully, to allow our hearts to break so that the universe can pour through us. To learn truly the meaning of grace and gratitude and become vessels of these things for others. We cannot offer others what we ourselves do not have. May God meet you in the places you need healing. May you receive the unconditional love and mercy and blessing of God. May you feel the gratitude that is the mirror image of grace, the natural response to grace. And may you carry that grace and gratitude forward for a world that sorely needs it**.** Amen.