Sermon on Proper 28 Year C 2022

The movie *Jungle* (2017) based on the best-selling book by Yossi Ghinsberg, tells Ghinsberg’s true story of surviving the Bolivian jungle in an adventure gone wrong. He suffers gruesome infections and infestations of worms and was rescued at the point of death, so I guess that’s a spoiler alert a little too late.

The movie is still worth watching if only for the fact that Daniel Radcliffe, of Harry Potter fame, does some of his most mature and, frankly, believable acting to date.

When Ghinsberg was rescued he may not have had the physical energy to shout for joy but inside he was and I’m sure his family back in Israel was!

What would make you shout for joy or fall on the ground, yes, flat on your face! – in front of someone?

You might feel this way if someone you love with all your heart made it through an operation that the docs said was hugely risky.

You might do it if you had all your debts taken care of and were given a new start.

You might do it if….

Which brings us to the gospel story. Which is the more surprising, that one person came back and at the top of his voice gave God glory or that nine didn’t?

Luke is here, once again, focused on the outsider, the foreigner, the Samaritan. We’re not sure why only the Samaritan came back to say thank you with all the exuberance he felt. This doesn’t feel like a morality tale or a parable, so we take it at face value, this is how it happened and we’re not sure why.

perhaps the Jews who were healed and who had gone to get their official clearance from the local priest to re-engage with society (think not a 14 day quarantine but a life quarantine!) were afraid of being ostracized again, just after finally being able to re-engage.

Jesus was a polarizing figure and given that perhaps they were grateful but felt they couldn’t afford to be seen giving him loud praise.

Perhaps they were just so eager to get back with loved ones that they simply didn’t go back and look for Jesus. Have you ever had the experience of realizing that you really owe someone a debt of gratitude but life got in the way and you really never thanked that person the way you probably would have liked too?

About a year ago I re-engaged with a professor who taught in the Humanities dept. at my alma mater. It was almost 30 years after the fact but I was one of those students who lived off campus, I already had a family and so after graduation I was never on campus and I had never really thanked him for his shaping influence on me. It was great to connect and make that clear.

These speculations are my way of saying that it’s not only the nine ex-lepers who are shown up by this story; Luke, I’m convinced, is helping us to notice that gratitude can easily escape many of us.

We know, intellectually, that it would be proper and good to thank God always and for everything as the letter to the Ephesians puts it.

The original focus of our faith is on a benevolent Creator who gives us all things, the mouthful of food and the mouth to chew it; the air we breathe and the lungs to breathe it, that song that takes your breath away, that smile that lights up your life and really, an incredible number of experiences that have shimmered in and through you and me.

That the world is like this, even with all it’s troubles, is amazing; we remind ourselves that it doesn’t have to be this way. And indeed many human beings at this time on our planet today don’t experience what we are fortunate enough to.

But even when we don’t have enough, even when we ourselves conspire against the goodness around us making life difficult, drab or dull, even there the goodness of things and of God surprises us. See our second reading where even in chains, the author of 2 Timothy can talk of God’s faithfulness.

But do we see it? Unless we see it, notice it, how can we be grateful? Our minds do not easily grasp the beauty of the familiar; they don’t grasp the sublime that is hidden in our routines.

This is why art is so important, art that paints the familiar but in a way that helps us see, again, maybe for the first time.

We didn’t evolve to contemplate. Our evolution has adapted us to be acutely aware of danger or of want; gratitude doesn’t factor high on the survival checklist.

But we can learn the way of gratitude. In our time psychology has also highlighted its importance. Gratitude helps reduce stress, it works magic in our relationships and smooths over conflicts; all true.

Luke takes it a step further; he develops the thought that if we “see,” we find “insight,” the outer sight informs our inner sight. “When [the Samaritan] *saw* that he was healed, he turned back, praising God in a loud voice.

Do you, this Thanksgiving, “see?” Do you want to have “insight?” Do you want to become aware of the sheer amazingness of your existence, that you come from the tiniest of seeds passed on from an almost infinite lineage that reaches back to the explosions of super novae. Star dust that has grown wise in laughter and tears, joy and sorrow. Do you see?

Without being simplistic, it really is simple, the old American folk hymn urges us to: “count your blessings, name them one by one, count your many blessings see what God has done!”

If you will, you will see. Paul does this in chains as he recognizes the faithfulness of God. Jeremiah asks the exiles to do this and bless a city that is not their home.

Perhaps this is why the Samaritan can see; he’s less familiar with God’s goodness; perhaps this is why visitors to our tradition can see what we have when those of us who have grown up in it can no longer see or simply don’t cultivate the seeing we need to cultivate.

Expressing Thanks opens your heart again. I’m thankful that God gives us everything, always and that Christ opens us that reality in fresh ways in this Great Thanksgiving!