

October 9, 2022
“Come and See What God Has Done”

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Psalm 66

Luke 17:11-19

Today, on this Thanksgiving weekend, the message I picked up on to ponder for this morning was basically an invitation. I titled this reflection “Come and See What God Has Done,” and I think the place I felt drawn to was a sort of “wow.” Wow, look at our lives, where we live, the Creation we have been invited to inhabit, the myriad of blessings we experience pretty much every minute of every day. At least for the most part. Blessings can be interrupted by pain, strife, injustice, and suffering, but a lot of folks would argue that even in the place of strife, blessings are wont to break through. So much of our human suffering is countered by kindness and compassion, by a refusal to countenance unfair practices, by standing with as opposed to turning aside. We can get mired in the place of strife, but today drew me to want to go to the place of happy, contentment, gratitude, and thanksgiving.

Some years ago I picked up a chubby little book called “14,000 things to be happy about.” It is six hundred and twelve pages of just that...things to be happy about. Every now and then I like to open the pages at random and glance down to see what Barbara Ann Kipfer, the compiler of happy things, has included as happy possibilities. Page 311, “turkey salad sandwiches.” Page 448, “freestanding fireplaces.” Page 92, “creative photography.” Page 453, “rushing brooks and dark, quiet forests beside the road.” Page 216, “turning points in life.” Page 27, “the hum of a freezer.” I don’t know if any of these things trigger happy in you, but just thinking about 14,000 things that make someone happy actually makes me feel happy. I wonder if it works for thankfulness as well? How many things can you think of right now that you are thankful for? I bet every single one of you instantly brought something to mind, and

quite simply that makes me thankful.

Pondering happy and thankful, it is hard to say whether today's Gospel story from Luke 17 is a happy one. Ten lepers are healed, marking an incredible turning point in their lives and something every one of them must have been happy about. The story falls short on thankfulness, however, as only one of the ten returns to the source of their good fortune to praise God and say thank you. Is Jesus astounded, disappointed, accepting? Presumably if Jesus were angry or disillusioned, he had the power to undo what he had done, but what good purpose would that serve? The one who turns back is a Samaritan, a foreigner. Jesus asks him, "the other nine, where are they?" It seems to come down to belief in who or what restores life—the God of life as Jesus upheld, or the priests who had the power to determine clean from unclean, welcome or exclusion. The Samaritan was unencumbered by a need to regain a place in a community that would always view him as an outsider. He noticed immediately that he was healed, and returned to Jesus praising God and falling at his feet to thank him for his mercy. The other nine were no doubt as equally relieved and overjoyed that their leprosy was gone and happy to be returned to the fold of their community. Jesus accepts the thanks of the one and blesses him, and we can be happy that Jesus showed us the way of God's radical inclusion.

It is a wonder, sometimes, that some people are happy and thankful despite. Another book I have had on my shelves a few years is "The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World," by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu with a weaving of their voices by Douglas Abrams. The Dalai Lama lives in permanent exile. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who sadly died in December 2021, grew up in apartheid South Africa. The Dalai Lama has been known to giggle, and Archbishop Tutu was rarely photographed without that enormous grin of his exposing his abundant joy. Both are people of

faith, albeit different faiths. Both are well respected wise souls and both have had much to say about pathways to peace and justice. Both have suffered and yet they write about joy.

In Chapter 6 of “The Book of Joy,” the Dalai Lama counsels that everyday, as we wake up, we must think “I am fortunate to be alive. I have a precious human life. I am not going to waste it.” Archbishop Tutu suggests that “Perhaps people will be moved to see that there are very, very, very many people in the world today who will not have had the kind of breakfast that you had. Many, many millions in the world today are hungry. It’s not your fault, but you woke up from a warm bed, you were able to have a shower, you put on clean clothes, and you were in a home that is warm in the winter. Now just think of the many who are refugees who wake up in the morning, and there’s not very much protection for them against the rain that is pelting down. Perhaps there is no warmth or food or even just water. It is to say in a way, yes, it is to say really, you do want to count your blessings.” Abrams writes that both men were skeptical of finding lasting happiness through sensual indulgence, but neither of them “was opposed to the pleasures permitted in their spiritual lives—Tibetan rice for one, rum raisin ice cream for the other. I wonder if those two treats are listed in “14,000 things to be happy about.”?

In addition, Abrams writes, “Gratitude is the recognition of all that holds us in the web of life and all that has made it possible to have the life that we have and the moment that we are experiencing. Thanksgiving is a natural response to life and may be the only way to savour it.” Such thinking, Abrams suggests, “allows us to shift our perspective...It moves us away from the narrow-minded focus on fault and lack and to the wider perspective of benefit and abundance.” He quotes Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Catholic Benedictine monk: “It is not happiness that makes us grateful. It is gratefulness that makes us happy. Every moment is a gift. There is no certainty that you will have another moment, with all the opportunity that it contains. The gift

within every gift is the opportunity it offers us. Most often it is the opportunity to enjoy it, but sometimes a difficult gift is given to us and that can be an opportunity to rise to the challenge.” Reflecting on their own respective suffering, the Dalai Lama noted that “Even suffering helps you to develop empathy and compassion for others.”

Brother Steindl-Rast further offers that “When you are grateful you are not fearful, and when you are not fearful, you are not violent. When you are grateful, you act out of a sense of enough and not out of a sense of scarcity, and you are willing to share. If you are grateful, you are enjoying the differences between people and respectful to all people. A grateful world is a world of joyful people. Grateful people are joyful people. A grateful world is a happy world.” In showing unencumbered mercy, Jesus transformed an afflicted outsider into a grateful and joyful man. One can only imagine how the grateful Samaritan lived beyond the moment and shared his joy. Certainly, the Gospel story ignites hope in us that we will be the “one” and not of the “nine”—to be healed of all that ails us and to be thankful, to turn our gratitude into renewed life and share the joy. If the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu are correct in their assumptions, gratitude and thankfulness lead to compassion and generosity. Chapter 6 concludes: “When we recognize all that we have been given, it is our natural response to want to care for and give to others.”

The story of the ten lepers is an invitation to come and see what God has done. The Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu invite us to consider what we can do when we turn gratitude and thankfulness into joy—joy that ignites in us empathy and compassion so that we can ignite joy in others. The invitation is to see what God can do in us that we might do for others, and so we have gone full circle. Of the thousands of things to be happy about, what makes you happy? What brings you joy? What are you thankful for? I know that I am thankful

for John, home, family, the smell of bread baking, birds splashing in the bird bath, the wave of a neighbour, trees. Thankful, how do you plan to express your gratitude for all God has done? I can imagine the joy we can bring to the world through our gratitude, and I have a hunch that God is waiting to see what we can be in God's name. Amen.