

“Making Room for Gratitude”

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¹¹On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹²As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" ¹⁴When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? ¹⁸Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." (Luke 17:11-19)

Flight attendant Faye Lane began her job as a flight attendant with great enthusiasm. She was a natural caregiver, and she was convinced she could do the job well. At her training, she was inspired even more when the founder of the airline came to the first day of class and gave a great speech. "Every one of you is here for a reason," he said, "and that reason is your ability to smile and be kind." His mission, he said, was to bring humanity back to air travel. It all fit her like a glove. She was elected president of her trainee class and even won the "Spirit Award." She couldn't wait to get up in the skies and surprise air travelers with unexpected kindness.

And then she started the job... and she very quickly discovered a new truth. "This job is hard," she said, "and people are horrible."

The pace of it was exhausting. Flying out of Kennedy, she had to take a subway, a bus, and then a shuttle just to get to the plane to start work. The cumulative effect of take offs, landings, and turbulence actually bruised her feet. But the most draining aspect of the job was dealing with people who acted horribly.

As we all know, toward the end of each flight, the attendants go down the aisle collecting all the used cups, peanut wrappers, and soiled napkins. As they do this, they are taught to say "thank you" to each patron. "Thank you for your trash."

"After a while, they made us stop calling it trash," Faye says. "We had to call it service items." They had to make this change because some of the more jaded and bitter flight attendants would go down the aisle saying "Sir, your trash."

"Ma'am, your whole family's trash."

Looking back, Faye realizes that seeing the world from 20,000 feet changed her perspective. "I saw some horrible things from above," she remembers. California wildfires threatening homes; flooded homes in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. But the most upsetting sight for her was the view of lower Manhattan after 9/11. When flights resumed after the disaster, Ground Zero smoldered for weeks. Multiple times a day, she would fly over that horrible reminder.

Those were tense days, the early weeks of air travel after the towers fell, and Faye remembers one of those flights very well. A somber tone had been set as the plane took off once more over the Trade Center site, but there was also this one guy who had immediately checked off a few of her biggest air travel pet peeves. First of all, his luggage was a garbage



bag. Flight crews hate that. That was strike one. Strike two came when he heaved his Hefty Bag into one of the overhead bins, closed it, and then stood there with his hand over the cabinet to keep anyone else from putting stuff up there. Other passengers had struggle past him in the aisle. "Those bins are shared space," she muttered to herself.

And the third and final strike was about to cross the plate. Early on, the flight hit some turbulence, causing the pilot to get on the intercom and ask everyone to return to their seats. Despite the captain's clear request, pet peeve guy popped right up and headed to the lavatory. He found it occupied, so he parked himself right in front of Faye. Flight attendants aren't allowed much personal space, and crowding their jump seat is a quick way to get right on their last nerve.

"Sir, the seatbelt light is on," Faye said with more than a little edge.

"I know," the man said, "but I've really got to go."¹

As she said, "This job is hard, and people are horrible."

I tell this story because I think we can all relate to the way Faye Lane was feeling. Life is hard, and it is easy for us to focus on the things that are not going right. We can start a day with great hope and positivity, but pretty soon we can get lost in our to-do lists and the busyness of the day. We can be distracted by things that annoy us, derailed by things that worry us, discouraged by things that burden us.

Maybe that's what happened to the other nine lepers. Jesus healed ten men, but only one came back to say thank you to the one who healed him. What happened to the other nine? Some have speculated about that, wondering why nine never sought Jesus out...

Maybe one of them waited to see if the cure was real.

One waited to see if it would last.

One said he would see Jesus later.

One concluded that he must have never had leprosy.

One figured he would have gotten well anyway.

One gave the credit to the priests.

One said, "Ah, Jesus didn't really do anything."

One said, "Any rabbi could have done it."

One said, "I was already getting better."²

I can sympathize with all of these possible reactions. We could even go as far as to say that the nine who did not come back to Jesus really did nothing wrong.³ They actually weren't supposed to get near to Jesus. The covenant law required them to stay away. That is why they shouted out from a distance, asking Jesus for mercy. Jesus shouts back over to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And that is exactly what they did. Give them credit, it was a significant act of faith, that, on the distant word of a man they did not know, they would risk going to the priests to be declared healed. All ten of them did what Jesus said to do. All ten of them did what was required of them under the law. Jesus never yelled out, "And make sure you come back and tell me how it went." So, all ten of them complied. All ten of them were blessed. Not one of them did anything wrong.

¹ Faye Lane, "Fireworks from Above," www.themoth.org.

² Charles L. Brown, *Content The Newsletter*, June, 1990, p. 3, www.sermonillustrations.com.

³ David Lose, "Second Blessing," <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2796>

However, the nine who did not come back did miss out on a special blessing – the blessing of gratitude. As the playwright Thornton Wilder once wrote, “We can only be said to be alive in those moments when our hearts are conscious of our treasures.” When we practice being grateful for the blessings we do have, we focus less on the negative and more on the positive. Our self-esteem grows and we are more self-confident. Gratitude helps us live in the present moment instead of dwelling on the past or worrying about the future.⁴ Gratitude is a way of life. Gratitude makes us well.

And, as we see in this story of Jesus, gratitude brings us closer to God. In this gospel passage, the only one who actually gets near to Jesus is the one who practices gratitude and thanksgiving. To quote the story, “*when he saw that he was healed, [he] turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him.*” Jesus tells him that his faith has made him well, but we have to believe that gratitude was a big part of this healing. It was gratitude that brought this healed man to Jesus' side.

John Killinger, a pastor and professor at Vanderbilt Divinity School, tells a story about a minister he knew in New York City. The pastor was in the middle of a thousand little things that had to get done that day, but as he hurried through the sanctuary, he happened to catch a glimpse, out of the corner of his eye, of an older gentleman sitting in the pews. He didn't recognize the man. The next time he passed by, the man was still there. Half an hour later, still there. Finally, as the minister passed through the narthex, he came face to face with the old man as he was finally walking out. The man could tell that the pastor was wondering who he was and what had brought him into the church that day.

"I used to come to this church many years ago," he explained. "My wife and I were married here sixty years ago today. She's been dead for eight years now. But I wanted to come back here today to give thanks for everything we had together. It was a wonderful life."

"In all the things I had to do," said the minister, "I almost forgot that man was even there. But, as I walked home that night, all I could do was think about him. I realized that's what it's all about -- coming back to give thanks. That man was one of God's victories."⁵

The book of Colossians urges us to seek out these kinds of victories, and to look more closely for them in our daily living. “***Pray diligently,***” it says. “***Stay alert, with your eyes wide open in gratitude.***”⁶

"Sir, the seatbelt light is on," Faye Lane said.

"I know," the man said, "but I've really got to go."

The flight attendant was tired and annoyed, and pretty much everyone was a little tense in those days. So, she figured she would try and make the best of this. This man was going to wait for the lavatory, so she forced herself into some small talk. "Are you traveling for business or pleasure?" she asked.

⁴ Mark Pettit, “5 Ways to Develop and Attitude of Gratitude,” <https://lucemiconsulting.co.uk/attitude-of-gratitude/>

⁵John Killinger, “Taking Time To Be Thankful -Luke 17:11-19,” www.goodpreacher.com/backissuesread.php?file=3270

⁶ Colossians 4:2 (*The Message* translation).

"Neither," the man answered. "I live in California, but I came to New York because my son was a first responder at Ground Zero, and he died there. I came to pick up his uniform, which is all I have left of him. It's in a bag in the overhead bin."⁷

As the wave of guilt passed through her spirit, the only words that mattered in that moment came out. "Thank you," she said. There were so many things that could have been said. Thank you for the selfless service your son gave on that terrible day. Thank you for the sacrifice that you, as a father, have been forced to accept. Thank you for reminding me who I am and why I am here. But all she could muster were the two words, "Thank you."

And it was enough.

"True, I saw a lot of horrible things from the air," Faye Lane remembers. "But I've also seen a lot of amazing, beautiful things from the air... the Grand Canyon, the Northern Lights, fireworks from above. And now, when I go through the cabin with my garbage bag, saying 'Thank you,' and smiling, I mean it, because I am making a gratitude list in my head, and every time I say 'Thank You,' I think of something I am grateful for."

To say "thank you" and mean it... to feel true gratitude and share it... that is an act of faith that brings us closer to God. Gratitude helps us live in the moment. Gratitude helps us see the good in the world – good that is all around us if we are just willing to see it. Gratitude makes us well.

What are the things that you can give thanks for today?

I give thanks today for Larchmont Avenue Church – for its people, its faith, its desire to serve God and other people – and I give thanks to the God who gave me the gift and blessing of calling me to this wonderful community.

I give thanks for talented and faithful colleagues who share with me this work of ministry, people who are generous with their friendship and support and give me so much hope for the church.

I give thanks for the people in my life who love me on good days and tough ones, who encourage me and forgive me and hang with me through thick and thin.

I give thanks for my parents who taught me and raised me in the faith... for my wife who celebrates with me the highs and tolerates the lows of a life in ministry and walks with me with steadfast love and strength... for my daughters whose love sustains me, whose talents inspire me, and who help me stay grounded in things that are good, and true, and faithful.

What is on the gratitude list in your head? How can you say "Thank you" today?

Ten lepers were healed by Jesus. All were given a gift. But it was the one who made room for gratitude, the one who came back to say "thank you" – he was the one who drew close to God.

Amen.

⁷ Faye Lane, "Fireworks from Above," <http://themoth.org/posts/stories/fireworks-from-above>.