

Luke 17:11-19
Thanksgiving
November 27, 2014
The Rev. John Forman

“In moments when we are truly alive,” writes one of the holiest men I have ever known, “in moments when we are truly alive, we experience life as a gift.¹” Br. David Steindl-Rast is a Camaldolese Benedictine monk who grew up in Nazi-occupied Austria. He tells the story of an air raid that came just as bombs started dropping from the sky. He was still on the street and nowhere near an air-raid shelter. He ducked into the nearest building he could find—a church, where he crawled under a pew hoping to shield himself from the shattering glass and flying debris. He covered his face with his hands, but could feel the ground shaking, hear the bombs exploding and smell the fire of the explosions. He was sure that the vaulted ceiling of the church was going to come down and bury him, but he lay there for almost an hour until the steady tone of a siren let him know that the bombing was over.

He stood up, dusted himself off and went outside into a glorious May morning. He was alive. Buildings he had nonchalantly walked past less than an hour earlier were now smoking heaps of twisted metal, piles of broken brick and mortar, splintered wood and shards of glass. But he was alive. And then came an overwhelming surprise. His eyes caught sight of a patch of lawn in the midst of all that destruction. “It was if a friend had offered me an emerald in the hollow of his hand,” he writes. “Never before or after have I seen grass so surprisingly green.

Surprise, Br. David suggests, is the beginning of a kind of fullness—the beginning of gratitude. He said to me once that what people seek most is happiness, but we cannot seem to make ourselves happy. We can, however, all learn to make ourselves grateful. And a grateful heart, over time, becomes a happy heart. Furthermore, Br. David proposes that the practice of making gratitude our basic life orientation can come through joyful surprises. In moments of surprising justice and mercy, in moments of surprising loyalty or truth, but particularly in moments of beauty, we catch little flashes of grace—flickers of God’s love for all creation. And *gratefulness* opens our eyes to that grace more fully.

¹ Br. David Steindl-Rast. *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer: An Approach to Life in Fullness*. New York: Paulist Press, 1984.

Ten people walking along a road in a borderland. To the north, Galilee, Jesus' home where Mary, Joseph and his community had steeped him in Jewish tradition and ritual. To the south, Samaria, across the mountains and part of Judea, a nation that had broken its vows to God and a people scorned by the Hebrew prophets. Ten people walking a road in a borderland; ten people with a skin condition that rendered them ritually unclean and consequently belonging to no community. The hospital chaplain in me needs to point out that our English translation makes a shift that is unfortunate. In the Greek, Luke refers to these ten people as "leprous people," not as lepers. They are human beings who have a disease, but they are not *defined* by their disease. Their humanity is the *essential* quality of their being and identity. The disease is an accidental quality. Jesus sees their essential quality.

When the ten see Jesus, raising a unified voice, they call, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." Without any dazzling works of wonder—perhaps even without touching the ten at all—Jesus simply tells them to go and show themselves to the priests. Culturally, a priest's examination and declaration was a final step toward bringing a ritually unclean person back into community. On their way, the ten notice that they have been cleansed. Curiously, Luke gives no indication as to the cause of the cure. I like one translation of the Greek text that renders the line as: "And it happened in the leaving him they were cleansed."

Nine of the ten, we are left to assume, simply keep on going once they notice this remarkable change. Imagine the joyful surprise! They were, after all, most likely ecstatic at the prospect of getting back to family and friends, as most of us would be. Jesus does not appear to be in any hurry to chastise them, nor should we—they were, after all, clearly following Jesus' command. But the Samaritan's response is different: he disobeys. Jesus told the ten to go and show themselves to the priests. Instead, the Samaritan turned back and fell at Jesus' feet in grateful disobedience. This is the kind of joyful surprise that opens the heart to gratitude. I like to imagine that Jesus, too, was joyfully surprised at the one person's return and show of gratitude. I like to imagine his question about the others to mean "why didn't they also joyfully disobey in gratitude?" Nine were cleansed and cured, but one was made *whole*.

Let me tell you two stories from my hospital chaplaincy (and I do have permission to tell these stories!). First story: 3:00 in the morning. My pager jerks me awake with a code blue. By the time I get to the room, the team has already been working on the patient for several minutes. The situation is not looking promising and the team has

decisions to make, so I get on the phone to patient's next of kin—his son who lived overseas. The two of them been estranged for nearly 40 years, but the son had decision-making authority about how long we should keep trying to revive his father, which means, I explain, causing quite a bit of trauma to the man's body. He says: "Do everything you can to keep that bastard alive, but I'm not coming over there." And then he hangs up. A little while later, the team gets a pulse. And then they get the patient breathing. And then he stabilizes. They brought him back to life against staggering odds. He left the hospital some days later, but I never saw him again and I expect his son didn't either. And so he was, in a sense, "cleansed and cured," and maybe there was even a minor miracle in there. But he was not made whole.

Second story: I was visiting a patient who had just been told that he did not have long to live. He told me, "I have never ever set foot in a church, but I know I'm going to have to answer to God for my life. What am I gonna say?" I asked him to tell me more about himself and we talked for several hours. "My wife and I separated more than 20 years ago," he told me, "but when she found out I was sick, she moved back here and got an apartment by mine so she could take care of me." And a little while later, he told me that he had reconnected to his only son—a son he had not talked with for more than ten years. "My kid kinda messed up a little when he was younger," he told me, "but you know," he said, starting to tear up, "he never did nothin' I couldn't get past and it seems like he mostly turned his life around. Most folks seem to really like him, and me, I just really love him a lot."

We talked about the healing that had gone on in his family and in his own heart, and even in his relationship with God. "When I talk to God, what's he gonna say?" he asked me. "Well," I said, "Do you remember what you told me about your son? I think it might be a lot like that. I think God will mostly tell you, 'I just really love you a lot'." He sighed, wiped his eyes and then asked me, "Is there anything I should do before I die?"

"Do you feel like you need to do anything?" I asked him. He broke out in a huge, teary smile, thought for a bit and then shook his head and said, "No. I think I'm good." "I think you are too," I told him. His faith had made him whole. He died at home a few days later—healed, in the sense of being made whole with his family, his God and his circumstances. His life understood as a gift. *Healed*, even though he was not cured and that's no minor event—that's a miracle.

We so often think of God's saving grace to mean "saved from hell." Yes, I think that's right. I also think there are ways that God's saving grace can be wake-up calls that

point us in the direction of wholeness if we let them—to those flashes of grace, those flickers of love that surprise us as we go about our daily lives. At first, these may mostly be triggers that invite us into gratitude. But with practice, these moments become longer and longer. Stretching from moments of grateful communion with God into hours, days and weeks until we are living a life of gratitude, a life of wholeness.

The practice of gratitude begins with moments of grace in our own lives, right where we are, because God is that personally loving with each of us. Family, friends and mentors can share their stories of joyful surprises, but we each have to discover our own moments—to discover for ourselves the very giftedness of life itself and what that gift means. On that road lies wholeness, where we experience life as a gift and we live it, truly alive, filled with gratitude.

Br. David tells the story of one of the predictable joys that comes his way each winter when he scatters cracked corn on a rock for the birds. One in particular, a cardinal, he describes as a flash of surprise. “I expect him,” Br. David says, “I’ve come to even know his favorite feeding times. I can hear him chirping long before he comes in sight. But when that red streak shoots down on the rock like lightning on Elijah’s altar, I know what e.e. cummings means: ‘The eyes of my eyes are opened.’”