



Richmond Hill Reflections

“A Grateful Response” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

October 13, 2019; Thanksgiving Sunday (Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost)

Reading: Luke 17:11-19; Excerpt from “Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life”

by Donald MacNeil, Douglas Morrison and Henri Nouwen

Gratitude. It's what this weekend is about. It's Thanksgiving after all, plus, we're sharing in communion. Another name for this sacred meal is Eucharist, from the Greek for thanksgiving. It seems apt then that the gospel reading from the lectionary has gratitude as a prominent part.

Yet, what is gratitude anyway? On one level, it's a feeling. When you look up “gratitude” in the dictionary it's defined as “the feeling of being thankful”. Now that seems a bit circular, but it points to how gratitude begins within us. If someone does a kind thing, I feel it in my heart, in joy. It starts there but ideally doesn't stay there. My feeling extends out to the other person. I value not just what they've done but appreciate them as well. I feel appreciated too. The Cree language captures this. Today you may hear Cree people say *miigwech*, echoing thank you in Ojibway, or based on English say *teniki*. But an older way to say thank you is *kitatamihin*, “you have done good to me.” It shows how you don't feel thankful in isolation but in a relationship.

This is why the Samaritan runs back to thank Jesus. He doesn't feel a general kind of gratitude but does so in connection to what Jesus did. I wonder if we are losing sight of this. On Thursday I attended the Climate Change 301 session put on by Liz Couture from Drawdown Richmond Hill. Someone commented how every economic system has pluses and minuses. Capitalism is a good system in that it promotes innovation, but it has a fatal flaw. It only factors in economic capital. In other words, it fails to factor in social and environmental capital, something which has led us to our present crisis. That statement reminded me how individualistic we're becoming, many acting as if what we each have is based purely on our merit without connection to others, not just human, including one's parents, their parents, their parents, social institutions, infrastructure, and so on; but ecological gifts like the air, water, soil, fertility of that soil from plants and insects, the list goes on. But nothing I have is truly only from my own effort. Everything flows from something else.

This is why it's important to nurture gratitude. Having that stance keeps me conscious of all the connections, relationships that make my life possible. In our individualistic focus, we can take much for granted. If I claim to be “grateful” for the roof over my head but think only about what I have achieved without considering all the other factors that made it possible, I'm not really all that grateful. I suspect it's an awareness of this that has made gratitude journals so popular. The

intentional practice of gratitude helps us to participate in our personal growth, like the ten lepers who aren't healed outright but as they go on their way to see the priests. Cultivating gratitude pulls us from self-focus and reminds us how much we depend on the connected circles around us. And the more we take time each day to pause in gratitude, the more connections we see.

I've seen this in a particular gratitude practice. You set a specific amount of time, say five minutes, and then list all the specific things you're grateful for. It forces you to go deeper than normal. When I've done it, I found that each idea led me to think of another and then another. For example, when I give thanks not just for food but think specifically of bread, on one hand I am led to give thanks for Glen who baked it, for our relationship, his love and support, for his passion for baking and to other interests like acting, for theatre and the arts, on and on I go. And then as I return to giving thanks for bread, I find myself led in another direction to give thanks for the flour and then the wheat, for the wheat field and the birds that fly over it, for the air, the farmer, and on it goes too. It is all about relationships, about connections moving ever outward.

The second reading touches on this in the form of divine compassion extending to the "most forgotten corners of the world". Compassion is "to feel with" a person. I can't have compassion without an awareness of our relationship. This in turn calls me to respond. This call to action is underscored in the gospel by all the movement. Jesus and his disciples are traveling. The lepers are unsettled, unable to live in the village because they're "unclean". They're healed as they go, and the Samaritan turns around to thank Jesus. The authors of our second reading say servant-hood is a defining characteristic of the divine, but again it doesn't happen in isolation. We are each to be an expression of servanthood. This too is part of gratitude. I don't just feel grateful. I need to respond out of the compassion and connection that gratitude engenders. Going back to the bread example, as I give thanks for the bread, I need to do more than just feel gratitude for Glen who baked it. I must tend our relationship, supporting him as he looks after me. Similarly, I must tend the soil and be conscious of what I put in the air or water if I'm to tend the earth from which the wheat came. And as I consider these relationships, I need to tend still more. The fact I can eat bread reminds me of the social capital that made it possible. I need to help those who can't afford bread, and advocate for policies that challenge inequality and give greater access to food for all. I also need to help the bakers by pushing for safer work places and rights for temporary workers.

As we pause with gratitude this Thanksgiving, may we do so aware that being thankful calls us to compassionate action. As we move from this table to our holiday tables, may we not just name gifts we have received, but consider as well ways that our gratitude invites us to actively respond in the world, nurturing our relationships, assisting others where we can, and tending to the earth. Amen.