

SERMON TITLE: "Celebrating Our Tenth with Gratitude"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 17:11-19
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: November 5, 2017, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

A couple months ago, when I told my history-loving husband that I was going to preach a sermon series on "Celebrating Our Tenth," Steve went straight to a shelf in our house and pulled out book. He flipped through it for a few seconds and then pointed me to an essay titled, "The Talented Tenth." I didn't get around to reading that essay until this week. But I'm glad I finally did.

"The Talented Tenth" essay, written by W.E.B. DuBois in 1903, was about the natural talent and great potential of African American people in our country. His opening example was a free and self-educated African American named Benjamin Banneker, who lived in the 1700s. Banneker studied astronomy, built clocks, wrote almanacs, and worked as a surveyor helping to lay out the nation's capital in Washington, D.C.

We get a sense of Banneker's eloquence and leadership in a 1791 letter he wrote to then-secretary of state Thomas Jefferson. In that letter, Banneker was trying to persuade Jefferson to turn away from the practice of slavery. Gratitude to God figured large in his argument, as Banneker wrote,

I freely and cheerfully acknowledge that I am of the African race, and in colour which is natural to them, of the deepest dye; and it is under a sense of the most profound gratitude to the Supreme Ruler of the Universe, that I now confess to you that I am not under that state of tyrannical thralldom and inhuman captivity to which too many of my brethren are doomed, but that I have abundantly tasted of the fruition of those blessings which proceed . . . from the immediate hand of that Being from whom proceedeth every good and perfect gift.

After expressing gratitude to God for his own liberty, Banneker turned Jefferson's attention to the recent, dangerous, and successful American effort to throw off servitude to the British crown. In such contemplation, wrote Banneker, "You cannot but be led to a serious and grateful sense of your

miraculous and providential preservation. You cannot but acknowledge that the present freedom and tranquility which you enjoy, you have mercifully received [as] . . . a blessing of heaven.”*

According to historian and essayist W.E.B. DuBois, Benjamin Banneker was in the top tenth of his people in intellect and ability. If so, we can see from his letter to Thomas Jefferson that Banneker didn't take his blessings for granted. He was celebrating his tenth with gratitude.

Since we started celebrating our congregation's tenth year at this Marriott-Slaterville location, we've been celebrating our tenth with the guidance of God's commandments. We've been celebrating our tenth with the community of God's people. And we've been celebrating our tenth with hope for our individual and congregational future. Today, as we finish up this series, I invite you to consider the importance of celebrating our tenth with gratitude.

1—THE BIBLE STORY

We begin with the Bible story. Luke 17:11-19 tells us the familiar story of Jesus healing ten lepers. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem when he came to a village. There, just on the outskirts, these ten lepers approached him, calling out for Jesus the Master to have mercy on them. Luke doesn't tell us anything particular that Jesus did or said to them except that they should go and show themselves to the priests. Verse 14 tells us that, as the ten went, they were made clean. As miracle stories go, that's a classic pattern. People in need sought Jesus' help, Jesus responded to their request, and all of them were healed. Everything happened just like it was supposed to. Praise God! And all the people said, "Hallelujah!"

But there's more to this story than just the healing. In verse 15, one of the lepers, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. Then he laid himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. Jesus' rhetorical questions that followed indicated that the other nine would have done well to return with praise and thanks also. But only this one--this foreigner, this Samaritan—did so. You can see it more obviously in the original Greek language of the New Testament, but, in affirming that his

faith had made him “well,” Jesus was emphasizing a deliverance and salvation that was bigger than just a physical cure. A body, mind, and spirit wholeness had come to that tenth leper because he was celebrating with gratitude.

2—BARRIERS TO GRATITUDE

Since celebrating with gratitude is so important in this healing story, it might be useful for us to consider some of the reasons why we find it hard to be thankful. And how, then, can we overcome those barriers to gratitude?

One of the most common reasons we don’t feel or express gratitude is that we think we deserve whatever good comes our way. We feel entitled. Like a victim seeking full restitution or like a spoiled child, we expect people to cater to our needs. We selfishly expect others to serve us. We expect society to formulate policies and programs that improve our lives, and we expect God to give us whatever we want. Since these benefits are expected, there’s no reason to get excited or effusive when they happen.

That might be why the one person who did return to thank Jesus was a Samaritan. Maybe the nine others felt like God owed them this healing. After all, they were Jews, God’s chosen people. God had promised to make them great. God had promised to care for them. Obviously, they deserved to be well. The Samaritan, on the other hand, knew that he was an outsider. So, he felt grateful to receive God’s help through Jesus. It seems unfortunate to me if we have to put ourselves down or be outcast by others in order to feel like God is lifting us up. But a healthy dose of humility is often good for the soul and helps us to feel gratitude to God—not for what we deserve, but for what our merciful and loving God chooses to provide for us.

A second reason we might not feel or express gratitude is a strong sense of duty. We believe that we should be reliable, competent, and helpful, and we believe other people should do the same. Again, there’s no reason to gush or fuss about any of that. It’s just what good citizens and good Christians do. Unfortunately, when we live in a duty-bound mindset, we can easily become

disappointed at less than stellar performance. We can become resentful and judgmental and burn out ourselves and others.

A very faithful and active woman in my last church told me that sometimes she would be missing from church on purpose, just to remind herself that she had permission to do that. Shirley didn't want to let herself get trapped in a sense of duty. She didn't want to become resentful of church involvement by feeling like she or anyone else had to be there all the time. When she came to worship and served on committees, she always wanted to feel joy in doing it. Shirley wanted to feel and express a sense of gratitude for what God was doing in her life and in our church. A sense of duty is very often a good thing, but we never want it to get in the way of celebrating with gratitude.

A third reason being grateful is difficult could be that it distracts us from other things we think we should be doing. I have to admit that, as I've pondered this story over many years, I sometimes find myself sympathizing with the nine lepers who didn't return to Jesus. After all, didn't Jesus tell them to go and show themselves to the priests? Weren't they doing exactly what he told them to do? We who are active, task-oriented, practical people have a tendency to move on quickly to the next thing to be done. That's good in the sense that we're able to accomplish goals. We're able to meet our own needs and help serve others. We're able to live life fully with lots of great experiences. It isn't so much that we don't feel grateful. It's just that we're busy thinking forward, organizing and enacting plans for what's ahead. Somebody has to do that, right?

But maybe this story of the tenth leper can remind even us busy people that we occasionally need to stop moving and reflect on how we got here. Before we get to the future, we need to recall the past. For total wellness of body, mind, and spirit, we sometimes need to sit ourselves down and write a thank you card to those people who have helped us along the way. And, most definitely, we need to express our thanks to God, without whom none of our life would be possible.

I like the lyrics we sang at the beginning of our worship service:

Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices;
Who from our mothers' arms has blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

CONCLUSION

Every time we come to worship, we have an opportunity to express our gratitude to God in prayer and song. Today, we also have a great opportunity to offer our thanks by placing our 2018 pledge cards in the big basket in front of the altar. Like the Samaritan leper who was healed, the well-being of our bodies, minds, and spirits will benefit most when we respond in thanks for the blessings of God in our lives. As our congregation moves forward to our tenth anniversary in this location, I hope you will join me in celebrating our tenth with gratitude.

*Julius Lester, ed., *The Seventh Son: The Thought and Writings of W.E.B. DuBois*, Vol. 1, (Vintage Books: New York, 1971), p. 386f.