

What Gratitude does!

Text: Were not all ten made clean? The other nine where are they? It seems that no one has come back to give thanks except this foreigner...

An airline pilot wrote that on this particular flight he had hammered his ship into the runway really hard. The airline had a policy, which required the first officer to stand at the door while the passengers exited, give a smile, and a “Thanks for flying XYZ airline.” He said that in light of his bad landing, he had a hard time looking the passengers in the eye, thinking that someone would have a smart comment, but no one seemed annoyed.

Finally, everyone had gotten off except for one little old lady walking with a cane. She approached and he thanked her for flying the airline. But then she asked, conspiratorially, “Sonny, mind if I ask you a question?” “Why no Ma’am, what is it?”

“Did we land or were we shot down?”

The Airbus 320 took off from LaGuardia at 3:25 pm. On its ascent to an intended 15,000 feet, at the 2,700-foot level the pilots saw a flock of big brown birds hitting their windshield. Suddenly both engines lost thrust.

Captain Sullenberger took over the controls while the co pilot tried to figure out procedures as to how to get the engines restarted. The passengers were aware of the impact and the sudden loss of thrust. They feared the worst. Sullenberger contacted LaGuardia and they cleared a runway for him and grounded all flights, but Sullenberger suddenly radioed that he was unable to return. He asked for clearance to another closer airport, got that, but he couldn’t make that one either. Casting in his mind for solutions he decided to ditch the plane on the Hudson

River. He chose a location close to the ferry terminal in the proximity of boats. He passed a message to all passengers “Brace for impact!”

The flight crew went into action to brief all passengers as to how to do that. They all thought this was the end. A young mother texted her husband good bye saying she loved him and the children and prepared to die. Meantime the plane was coming down fast. Sullenberger did an amazing job of keeping the thrust less plane steady for a flawless emergency landing on the water. Once landed, the flight attendants leaped into action. One passenger panicked and opened the rear door and water began to flood in. Orders were given to walk on the top of the seats from back to front. Life rafts were deployed out the doors as the plane began to sink. A person in a wheelchair was evacuated with difficulty onto the wings. All 155 passengers got out of the plane as rescue boats began to arrive. There were injuries that were handled including hypothermia as the water was just above freezing. Sullenberger walked the empty plane twice before leaving himself to make absolutely sure there was no one aboard. Then he stepped out on the wing for rescue.

The gratitude for what he had done was awesome! Every passenger and every passenger’s family were overjoyed. The entire flight crew was honored with the Master Medal from the Guild of Air pilots and Navigators. President Bush thanked Sullenberger and his crew. President elect Obama congratulated them. Mayor Bloomberg thanked Sullenberger. The media did endless positive interviews.

People all over the world were delighted as well as the American people. There was a wave of gratitude that swept over the news media as survivors told their stories.

In a world of so much desperate news, there was suddenly this good news story of heroism, of people caring for each other in an awesome way, and briefly our common humanity surfaced in pure healing gratitude.

When the Historical Jesus walked the streets of Palestine he was asked for hard things in terms of healing. There were many forms of skin disease classified as leprosy in Biblical times. Leprosy in its worst form was a terribly dreadful disease. Lepers were isolated and had to cry out that they were unclean whenever they approached people. Often it was a slow death sentence where a person through loss of sensation could damage or lose fingers, arms, legs and deterioration of the optic nerve and thus lose their sight. So, one would think that when they actually got healed that they would be very grateful, right?

Perhaps they were, but the story is in the record for one reason. Only one man actually came back to give thanks and he was a foreigner.

Jesus was very aware of people other than Jews and often used them as examples to teach like His story of the Good Samaritan or His encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. This little leper story again lifts up the right action of a non-Jew... controversial in Jesus' day where tribalism was so strong. Remember too that Jesus' first sermon in Nazareth got him into trouble because he lifted up a foreign woman and Naaman the Syrian. So, we know for these reasons that this little story is authentic to the tradition of the historical Jesus. He cared for foreign nationals living in Palestine and was not above citing their virtues to an intolerant audience no matter what the cost!

But whenever he did that, the light on the issues involved became stronger. And at the heart of this story is that Jesus appears to be surprised at the behavior of the nine others who did not return to give

thanks. Thus Jesus, it appears, expected to be thanked, and wanted God to be acknowledged rather than taken for granted. It was not all about the lepers, it was also about God's compassionate action as well.

So, Jesus like all the rest of us, wanted to be thanked. And we can imply through Jesus, who represented what God was like to us so clearly, that God also wants to be thanked. Do we do that?

That's the point of this little story. It is also the point of every worship service and it is one major reason we worship every week- to give thanks with a grateful heart...Done right a good worship service can transform the week through gratitude. But, have you ever asked yourself why it is sometimes difficult to be grateful?

As little children we were probably brought up to say thank-you as good manners. "What do you say?" we would say to our children and then would come a perfunctory "thank-you". Are we unwittingly teaching our children that we should say thanks and that they can do so without any deep feelings? It is just polite we say.

But gratitude is not about being polite. It is all about feelings. For instance, if Sullenberger had just saved your son's life you would not be perfunctory, but heartfelt. When you saw him, you would want to shake his hand, look him in the eyes and say THANK-YOU! Possibly hug him! You would want him to know just how grateful you were!

Some of us feel diminished if we say thank-you when someone has helped us. So, we remain silent. We should have been able to do this ourselves we think, and so we are not grateful. But when we do not express genuine gratitude, we cheat the world and ourselves.

If we want to live meaningfully, we can add a smile or a hug or some tangible way of appreciating another person. For gratitude recognizes

the blessing we received and the wonder of another person. Why would we hold that back?

Some folks think that if we say thank-you that we now owe something in return. So, we say nothing for tactical reasons. But when we do this, we only hurt ourselves for being grateful is a normal, natural response.

If we are self centered and think that its all about us, then who needs to be grateful? We are self sufficient; we don't need help. We don't engage in team playing, we do it all on our own. The captain of the plane, the physician surgeon who operated, the rabbi who healed us... they are just doing their job. They are professionals and professionals don't need thanks. They are supposed to do all that kind of stuff. That is what they are paid to do... but lack of genuine gratitude cheats the world and above all cheats ourselves!

Why?

Because all of us experience moods. We get up in the morning and say:

“My God, thank-you for a beautiful day!” Or we say “My God another day!”

Now which statement makes you feel better?

Happy people know this truth: When we are happy, we are truly grateful! The reverse also is true. When we are grateful, we are truly happy.

We live in a very depressing world. Turn on the news and we hear news of fresh disasters. The Middle East is in turmoil. Refugees are drowning in the Mediterranean sea. Russia has invaded Ukraine. Retaliatory attacks have destroyed half of the buildings in Gaza and killed over

25,000 Palestinians. The USA has hit targets in Yemen. It goes on and on doesn't it? and it's nearly 98% bad news.

This cannot help but affect us, so we move into coping modes and escapism. We switch the news channel and get into sports. But what if our favorite team loses? Then what? Perhaps we look for another means to cope. We get into Christmas or a big birthday or wedding celebration and hopefully it is all fabulous. But what if that relative does her passive aggressive stuff in your home or at the celebration and you are the target? What then? You were trying so hard but that difficult person has just pushed all your buttons!

The good news is this: There is an antidote.

Gratitude! Start thinking about something to be grateful for. And don't make it global like: Isn't life wonderful? Be specific! Be thankful for the car that is running perfectly, the roof over our heads, the food on the table, our shoes that fit us, that Christmas and New Year or birthday card that came in the mail, the computer you are using, the water in the tap, the electricity, the heat in the radiator. There is an endless list of things to be grateful for.

Start thinking on these things, rather than sinking into the negative. As St Paul said: "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything is worthy of thanks, dwell on these things. The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, (and then something quite wonderful will happen) The God of peace will be with you!

What a promise that is rather than being depressed and down in the mouth that we can have the Presence of The God of Peace!

For if we feel truly grateful, that Presence of God will heal us to the bottom of our souls!

Doug Setter from Winnipeg Manitoba was sergeant in charge of an 8 man section of Canadian troops in the former Yugoslavia. This day he was involved with maintenance control- a never ending routine of repairing damages or replacing material stolen by the desperate population that remained in bombed out villages. This day they were working on a defensive area that they had previously fortified with sandbags chicken wire and lumber.

His men, one after another were into complaining. Feeling no support from the Canadian media and little or none from the remaining locals who would look at them curiously or just ignore them, his men started the litany of complaints “Why don’t we just let the two sides go at it and sort it out. Isn’t that what they want?”

As they entered what was left of a house one said: “Just look at this bloody mess!”

Doug cut him off and said “Let’s just get the job done!”

Months ago, when he had left Canada, Doug had been full of idealism about helping third world countries, the downtrodden and homeless children. But now the reports of torture, infanticide or executions were wearing on him. To him what he was doing was becoming pointless. He would be told by a local: “Get out of my country!” The media criticism at home was relentless. Every day his men were into loud griping. He had tried to tell his men to keep the griping down but today he had given up. He no longer cared... As his men were carelessly flinging supplies off the truck, he suddenly saw a young woman walking among the crumbling buildings and all the broken glass with a tray which smelled like coffee.

She was slim with well kept dark hair. Her face was etched with worry lines, she had teeth missing from lack of dental care, she had a deep sadness in her eyes. But she spoke cheerfully! She offered the coffee tray to him hostess style. Doug brought up to say “thank-you” by his mother thought that the ‘show no favoritism’ rule could be bent just a little and so he gave her his thanks from his heart.

“Over here!” he hollered to his men. “C’mon for a coffee break.”

“Thank-you,” he said accepting one of the small cups full of floating coffee grounds. He sipped it carefully as one by one his men took cups, like kids after candy. It was warm, strong and bitter but it was powerful.

He replaced the cups with another big thank-you. She flashed him that sweet, missing tooth grin and then walked away amongst the rubble. Her head was held high and her walk was proud. Doug wondered how she could be like that, even after losing everything? For all he knew that might have been the very last of her coffee. And there they were, six healthy, fit, Canadian soldiers, with food in their bellies, money in the bank, and a few thousand dollars of dentistry in their mouths. Back home in Canada they all had homes and families who were safe and waiting for their return. The men all began thinking the same thing.

For the next few hours, sweat poured off them like running water as they worked extra hard into the afternoon. Only now, there wasn’t a single gripe coming from anyone! ...That is what gratitude does!!

Lets make heartfelt thanksgiving our way of life. Happiness lies that way! Amen.