

**Psalm 27: 13**  
**Luke 17: 11-19**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**  
**November 24. 2013**

Traveling to Chituka Village in Malawi was an eye opener on many levels. The vast majority of people live at the subsistence level, getting by from day to day. Only a few have even the basics of what we would call necessities. The less than one percent who have wealth live behind high barbed wire walls. They have caretakers who live in tiny rooms in the back of the houses and whose job is to protect the property from intruders.

In Chituka Village there is no indoor plumbing, no electricity. The only fuel is wood which means that deforestation is a huge problem. Almost everybody walks everywhere. A fortunate few have bicycles. Some travel on dangerously overcrowded flatbed trucks on roads that are not maintained with no shoulders. While there are schools they are terribly overcrowded with no pencils or paper or books. When Keni Banda told me that math problems were worked out with sticks in the dirt I thought he was exaggerating. I saw numbers drawn in the dust.

I now understand Keni's passion to raise the desire of students to learn and to have aspirations, especially girls who have no future beyond becoming pregnant as early as age eleven and twelve. Which reminds me: there is virtually no medical care. The nearest hospital is nearly two hours away. The stories that Keni's aunt told us about medical practice made Carl's and my skin crawl.

Yet for all of this, the one thing I rarely heard, if ever was complaining, demanding, resentment, or whining about life. And I realized that in Malawi, complaining and feeling sorry

for one's condition and being jealous of what others have is a luxury they cannot afford, or simply are happier without. On returning to the United States, by far the most prosperous country on earth, I was struck by the fact that complaining, blaming and feeling put upon is a luxury we not only apparently can afford, but is one in which we indulge so much that we are only dimly, if at all, aware that we are doing it. We have won the lottery of life by being born into this wonderful country and yet we spend millions of dollars on lottery tickets to get more. We just approved the building of casinos to lure more people to spend more money in the fruitless attempt to secure their futures with money. What is wrong with this picture?

My aim is not to sentimentalize the poverty of Malawi and condemn the affluence of the United States. But it is to lift up the almost complete absence of gratitude in this land of ours. Very few of us have any real sense of what the word gratitude means, or its sister word, thanksgiving.

Gratitude derives from the Latin word for grace. Grace is the experience of receiving a gift that we did not and could not earn on our own. Gratitude is the response to this gift. People who have every basic need met and more have a hard time being grateful because there is nothing we truly need. We are far more aware of what is missing from our lives than what we in fact have. And what is missing is rarely something we truly need.

This is a 100% *spiritual* problem. A lack of gratitude is the outcome of forgetting that all we have and all we are is not of our own making. In the King James translation of Psalm 100 the verse reads, "It is he that hath made us and not we ourselves." A grateful heart begins with the acute knowledge that we are not self-made men and women. We might never have been born. *We get to live.* Anything less than the deep awareness of the miracle of the gift of life

leads to the heresy that somehow are the authors of our lives, deserve what we have and have a right to fight to protect it. We may count our blessings; which is an obviously good thing to do. But that is not the same as gratitude.

True gratitude is illustrated by the encounter between Jesus and the ten people afflicted with leprosy. Because of their disease they have been separated from everything that matters—homes, families, jobs and friends. Most of all according to the Law of Moses, through no fault of their own they are separated from God. They feel acutely the sense of being isolated from everything and everyone. But the sense that God might condemn them for this disease is most crushing of all.

Thus it is that when Jesus walks by they do not cry out, “Heal us!” They cry, Jesus. Master! *Have mercy on us!*” Mercy is for the suffering of the whole human being: the healing of the disease, yes, but also and perhaps even more so, the restoring of relationships to family friends and to God.

Jesus is always moved by deep and unconditional trust. And so he tells the ten to go to the priest to be ritually cleansed and restored. Do not miss the the importance of what happens next: they all go, *even though no healing has happened. They believe and trust Jesus.* And as they take these steps of faith they realize a miracle has occurred. *They are healed!* With joy in their hearts they continue on to the priest to be restored to God and their community. I have no doubt that they will count this as a tremendous blessing.

But one of them interrupts his trip to the priest. When he realizes that he is healed he is compelled by gratitude to turn around and throw himself at Jesus’ feet, thanking him with emotions too deep for words. Jesus is profoundly moved. He does not so much judge the ones

who have gone on to the priest as to notice the difference in the quality of the response to the healing. Nine have received the grace of healing and have literally taken it in stride. They are now able to resume the lives that they had before they were afflicted. But this one at Jesus feet—he cannot resume life in the same way. His life has not simply been restored, it has been completely transformed and redirected. He will spend the rest of his life giving glory and honor to God who in Jesus has given him a new life: a life that he could never achieved on his own. It will be his joy to point others to Jesus. It will be his honor to serve others as Jesus served him. Gratitude to God in and through Jesus is the new organizing principle of his life.

This friends, is the true meaning of gratitude. It cannot be manufactured. Like all good gifts it comes from God whose best description is one simple word: love. It is this spiritually revolutionary experience and new life orientation which makes the community of faith so sadly necessary in this world. The world needs to know that there is a life greater and more alive than the one spent trying to secure our place in the world. People need to know that there is a reality far more amazing and worth living than the acquiring oOf money and things with its consequential fear of losing them.

It is this deep trust that causes people of faith to set aside their own needs for that of another. It is this deep thankfulness that causes people of faith to care for one another without counting the cost. It is the realization that in sending Jesus into the world to teach us God's way for humanity, to endure our rejection and to die for our selfish fear based souls and to rise triumphant from the grave *really has happened and is not just a pleasant myth*—that completely changes a life. When we awaken to the fact that the grace *has already been given*

not just to the world in general *but to each of us* then we must come back to Jesus and give him thanks. We cannot *but* live our lives in grateful service to him. Amen.