

*October 9, Second Sunday of the Season of Gratitude
Gratitude as a Spiritual Practice
The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson*

Today is the first Sunday in our Season of Gratitude

To clarify, the “Season of Gratitude” is not one of the six liturgical seasons recognized by the church.

The six liturgical seasons start at the end of November with Advent, then Christmas, then Epiphany, then Lent, then Easter, and, finally, then Pentecost – which is the long season we’re in now. Eventually, Pentecost starts to be called “Ordinary Time”

Today is actually the 18th Sunday after Pentecost, and so we could call it that

But, like the Season of Creation which was established by a global community as a time during the months of September and October to recognize the importance of our relationship to God’s creation, the Season of Gratitude is a time for us to think about and ponder a spiritual practice of Gratitude

Except, I made it up – it’s not supported by a global community of ecumenical leaders creating resources and you may not see other churches calling these next seven weeks the Season of Gratitude

But, it is supported by our lectionary readings and feels apropos to this season of harvest, the national holiday of Thanksgiving, and our congregation’s Stewardship campaign

Our stewardship materials will be going out soon and you’ll see that they have the theme of “reweaving our community”

This theme speaks to the idea that in its almost 50 years as a congregation, St. Bart's has been like a beautiful patch-work quilt: the different colors, sizes, and origins of our swatches – which are our members and ministries – has been beautifully woven together to create a unique quilt that has sheltered our community and provided a spiritual warmth to our lives.

Over the past few years, the threads that had previously held us tightly together have loosened: between social distancing and quarantines, masks and Zoom gatherings, the ways that we previously connected us as a community were discontinued or distanced in an effort to keep our beloveds safe.

With gratitude, those precautions are lifting and we are, once again, venturing out into the world with a sense of newness and renewal.

The community of St. Bart's is coming back together for worship, education, music, fellowship, and service and the desire to strengthen and re-weave our quilt is stronger than ever.

While our swatches may have loosened and the distance between some of us grown, the thread that holds us together is still there. God is ever-present in our lives and the expression of faith that resides in the St. Bart's community is exuberant in the Spirit.

Re-weaving our quilt requires the intentional effort of the whole community to make sure no swatches are forgotten and so that new swatches can be added.

Ultimately, this is what we believe we are called to do together as the community of St. Bart's: to re-weave the fabric of our community to see what a beautiful quilt we can be in this new season of St. Bart's ministry.

So how do we reweave our community?

You know it's not just a modern day issue to face, the need to reweave our community

In today's reading from Luke, we hear about Jesus coming upon a group of lepers on the outskirts of town

You'll notice in the text that it says that they kept their distance from Jesus and his disciples – this wasn't out of any concern on the part of the lepers facing the burley disciples, but rather the customary distance at the time for people with leprosy

Folks with this debilitating disease were ostracized from the community, forced to live on the outskirts like where we find this group of 10 today

As commentator Debie Thomas reminds us, "According to the customs of the day, they live in seclusion, keep their distance from passersby, sport torn clothes and disheveled hair, and announce their own contagion in loud, humiliating cries: 'Unclean! Unclean!'"¹

They were totally "othered" and as such they kept their distance

But this doesn't prevent Jesus from intervening

They know who he is and they call out to him "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" and the text goes on to say: "When he saw them, he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were made clean."

Healed!

Now the story gets more complicated and more beautiful

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2395-a-foreigner-s-praise>

One of them, upon noticing he has been healed, comes running back to Jesus, prostrates himself (lies face down on the ground) in front of Jesus, and thanks him

And the one who comes running back, this healed leper, was a Samaritan.

The context of this comment is a centuries old conflict between the Jews of Judea and the Jews of Samaria (where we get the term Samaritan)

It has to do with having different capital cities and different Temples as well as an accusation of the Samaritans inter-marrying with their conquerors – all in all, it meant that Judeans and Samaritans did not get along and did not hang out

It's interesting how the leper community did not discriminate against this Samaritan leper – and neither did Jesus

In fact, in running back to Jesus, Jesus isn't shocked and ashamed that he healed an "enemy" – in fact, he is moved by his gratitude and his display of love and appreciation: "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well"

In this story, Jesus is reweaving community by this act of healing – by acknowledging those with disease and disability as siblings in this journey and by letting go of long-held-onto conflicts that ultimately serve no purpose except to exclude

As someone who doesn't read the Bible literally, I'm not sure that Jesus *actually* took away this group of 10's leprosy so much as he invited them back into the community. He sent them from the outskirts *back* to the very center of community life: he sent them to the priests.

And the response is utter gratitude

Meda Stamper, a commentator from Leicestershire, England, writes that "Love that springs from gratitude is the essence of faith."²

Love that springs from gratitude is the essence of faith

There are those who are missing from our community – those who are on the outskirts

And, if we're honest, there are likely times when we have been or have felt like we too were on the outskirts of the community: disconnected, in conflict with others in the community, distracted, overwhelmed, or like there were parts of ourselves that we couldn't bring into community: our sexual orientation, our gender identities and expressions, our addictions, our mental illness

Meda Stamper notes: "we might also consider the parts of us that are hidden in the borderlands of ourselves where we may least want to be seen and most need to be touched. Jesus, who is not afraid of borderlands, does not mind meeting us in those places, and it may be that by recognizing him there, we will find in our deepest selves a new outpouring of the grateful love that makes well."

We are reweaving our community – finding the things in ourselves that have caused a distance for us in the community and seeking healing

Recognizing the distance we feel towards others or the things that have caused them to feel distant to our community and seeking healing

And, we learn today that we can, like Jesus, be the mediators for healing, for reconnection, for the tearing down of false boundaries, for the outreach that can make all the difference

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-28-3/commentary-on-luke-1711-19-3>

And, this is risky business – while we admire Jesus for his outreach to lepers and Samaritans, it was *not* appreciated or admired from the folks in his day – it made him an outlaw

We, too, sometimes feel a little vulnerable reaching out to those we haven't seen in a while and especially a bit anxious to invite people to come to church

But the result: a love that springs from immense gratitude which is the essence of faith

Because, who knows, perhaps this is *just* the community that someone needs

Gratitude – gratitude that Jesus knows us and sees us and loves us and welcomes us in this place.

Gratitude that all of the things that seemed to separate us from God and God's community are not holy and divine, they are often human-made, sometimes cruel, and must be demolished

Gratitude that though we may not always be here, we are always welcome when we return

The Samaritan leper teaches us this – the outcast, the marginalized, the “other” teaches us this lesson today that, as Debie Thomas puts it, “Clearly, there is something about the practice of thankfulness that enlarges, blesses, and restores us.”

Gratitude enlarges, blesses, and restores us

Let us journey a few weeks in gratitude and perhaps we, too, will be enlarged, blessed, and restored – dare I say re-woven – by this practice.

May it be so, Amen.