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“An Attitude for Gratitude”

A sermon by Olanda Carr

Second Sunday in Lent (Year C)

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Joshua 24:14-15; Luke: 17:11-19

Good morning! It’s a pleasure to be here this morning at First Presbyterian. As a Ministry Relations Officer for the Presbyterian Foundation, I frequently travel all around the Mid-Atlantic region, meeting with congregations on a variety of topics, related to stewardship and legacy giving. For the past several months, I have had the fortunate experience of working with this congregation and a few of your members on these very topics. In all honesty, I don’t believe I knew at the time that these interactions would lead me here, with me speaking for you all on a Sunday morning. I say that just to give you all a fair warning—keep your expectations low!

A few weeks ago, I suspect many of you all were like many of my family members and friends in Charlotte—preparing to watch the Super Bowl. While the event is always an exciting thing to watch, I am sure we all agree that it was a bit “extra exciting” this year because the home team was in it. As a Charlotte native and longtime Panthers fan, I found myself getting more and more excited about the game as the big day approached. I even went to the pep rally held in downtown Charlotte. The cooling temperatures were truly no match for the warmth and love shown by the thousands of fans gathered in the city that day, cheering the team as they prepared to depart to California.

After the pep rally cheers died down, I found myself in a bit of a quandary. Where was I going to watch this historic game? My usual plans of having a few folks over to my house didn’t seem quite sufficient this year—my inner thoughts were telling

me that I had to do something big. But how big? And what does big mean anyway? Soon, invitations began coming in steadily, one by one. I would weigh each one carefully—the dangers of having a mathematical mind. I found myself using metrics like the length of the drive, number of folks attending, etc. Suddenly, where I was going to watch the game had become a major, time consuming decision for me.

I will spare you all the details, but I will tell you that I ultimately did make a decision. I watched the game with some immediate and extended family members and had a great time, minus the disappointing loss. We won't talk about that though—another topic for another day! But what we will talk about is decisions—something we must make in life constantly. What it really boils down to is this: I had to stop waffling and make a decision about the game. And aren't we all expected to do similar daily? From the moment we wake up and decide whether or not to put on slippers until the time we decide to go to bed later that evening, we are literally always making decisions. Some are quite simple, while others, like "Super Bowl Gate," are much larger in magnitude. And it's generally the larger ones that often cause us to struggle, often lamenting over what to do and when to do it.

Which brings me to our text this morning: in Luke 17, we find the account of the ten lepers that were cleansed upon meeting Jesus. Yet, though ten lepers were cleansed, the text describes that only one made the seemingly unpopular decision to come back. Only one managed to come back to express "an attitude of gratitude" for his cleaning. My bible describes this one, wise leper through the use of the passage subheading "the grateful leper," so I will refer to him as such during this message—the one who decided to come back. Just for a few minutes, let's take a look at the actions of the grateful leper. While I am sure there are many lessons to be extracted from this passage, I contend that the leper did "something"—three main things while expressing his gratitude attitude to Jesus:

- i. The first thing he did is perhaps the simplest to identify, but perhaps the most significant: he came back! After petitioning Jesus to have mercy on him, heeding Jesus' directions and journeying to the priests, and subsequently being cleansed, he didn't forget his blessings. He remembered

his petitions to Jesus, remembered his plea for cleansing, remembered his healing, and felt compelled to say “thanks.” It was just that simple—how could he not say thanks for having his prayers answered? How could he not say thanks for receiving such a blessing? Yet how many times do we forget to do just that? We lift prayers for healing. Prayers for employment. Prayers for green lights when we are running late to work ... prayers that are often answered, yet quickly forgotten and not acknowledged with a simple “thank you” to God, with whom all things are made possible.

Perhaps that’s the simplest attitude adjustment of them all: remembering to say “thank you.” Thank you to Jesus. Thank you for the countless others in our lives whom we perhaps take for granted.

- ii. Our friend, the grateful leper, also had the courage to go against the norm. At the time he petitioned Jesus for cleansing, he wasn’t alone. He was with nine others, who suffered from the same fate as he. They all pled with Jesus, together. They traveled to the priests, together. They were cleansed, together. Yet, when our friend, the grateful leper, returned to thank Jesus for this healing, he was alone. While we may never know what exactly was going through our friend’s mind, it appears he wasn’t afraid to be a trailblazer. He wasn’t afraid to be different from others around him. Though his peers had also been healed and were content to enjoy their new, cleansed lives, the grateful leper knew what he had to do. He had to express gratitude.

The grateful leper’s actions here remind me a bit of our Old Testament lesson from Joshua. In our lesson, we find Joshua addressing the tribes of Israel. He identifies the option at hand—either worship the gods of the Amorites or worship the one, true God who led their ancestors out of Egypt. But Joshua is clear during his address: “But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

Joshua’s stance bears similarity to the grateful leper’s commitment to gratitude. I imagine him sounding much like Joshua just prior to his return to thank Jesus, perhaps stating something like, “I’m not sure what you all are planning to do, but as for me, I am going back to thank Jesus.”

And sometimes we have to do like Joshua, like the grateful leper: defy what others are doing, go against the masses, be the lone voice in the wilderness, unabashedly thanking God with no fear of consequence. And I believe such praise does not go unnoticed, as Jesus said upon the grateful leper's return, "Were there not ten cleansed?"

- iii. And we can learn one more thing from our grateful leper friend. He returned to thank Jesus "in a loud voice." The text suggests that sometimes we may not simply need to be thankful for our blessings, but we must do so in a loud voice. Now, have no fear—I have not forgotten my Presbyterian roots. For many of us, the thought of us doing anything in a loud voice can be a pretty scary thought! But I am suggesting that we consider using "a" voice to be thankful, demonstratively using whatever voice we have been blessed with from God.

I contend that a "loud voice" doesn't mean we have to necessarily speak at high volume to others about how good God has been to us. Sure, it *can* mean that, but a loud voice can just be 'doing something' and be communicated through many other ways:

1. An act of testimony, a simple story shared between friends, acquaintances, or even strangers about how a particular blessing from God has impacted your life. You never know how your testimony can shape, inspire, or encourage someone else.
2. Being generous—Acts of generosity can be a way to loudly demonstrate God's goodness and blessings upon your lives. Regular giving of tithes and offerings to your congregation are examples of such generosity. Planned giving in conjunction with your estate plan is another example—a lasting legacy of an endowed gift can speak loudly for generations to come. Earlier this morning, I spoke to your Sunday School class here. We discussed the various ways the loud voice of a planned gift can contribute to the ministry of a congregation. Your congregation has established several funds that

will speak to the mission and ministry of First Presbyterian for generations and generations to come. I was so inspired to learn that you all are on the cusp of celebrating 100 years of ministry. That is amazing. I share that excitement—we are celebrating 150 years of ministry in my home congregation this year as well. In our congregation, we are abuzz of what that means to us and how we learn from the congregations of our ancestors, how we learn from the renovations that have occurred in sanctuaries such as this, and mine at home, and how we can apply those lessons moving forward into the future. That is what we need: what a lasting legacy will do, it will help you have a bit of contribution into how that future ministry, how that legacy of First Presbyterian Church will go well into the future.

3. Random acts of kindness—perhaps a few of you may remember the movie “Pay it Forward” from years ago, with the little boy who started a movement to change the world by doing “something big” for three people who really needed it with the understanding that each of them would do the same thing for three more. I think there’s a lot to learn from this philosophy—spontaneous acts of kindness motivated from God’s blessings can often inspire others to do the same thing for someone else.

These are just a few examples of how we can “speak” to others about how God has blessed us, expressing gratitude for all God has done. There are many other ways of course, but the significant element is that we learn from the grateful leper and “do something” to express thanks.

Friends, that is what is often missing from our efforts at stewardship, planned giving, and other forms of generosity. It’s not about budgets, bills, and water heaters. It’s about our attitude. Our attitude, or lack thereof, of gratitude. Our attitude should be one of gratitude to God for letting us live as long as we have lived in the manner in which we are living. And sometimes our attitude may not look like the attitude of others. And trust me, that’s okay! There are numerous moments in life where we must make our decisions, even if they appear to be

different from the masses. Our grateful leper friend has taught us that it's more than okay to go against the norm.

Dr. King was once quoted as saying, "Ten thousand fools proclaim themselves into obscurity, while one wise man forgets himself into immortality." This quote rings true today, as the one leper who returned has certainly found himself "immortal" in scripture, while the others seem to have proclaimed themselves into obscurity.

In other words, there comes a moment in our lives when we must do something—make decisions that no one else can make for you. Dr. King recognized that. The grateful leper realized that. Their attitudes of gratitude inspired them to be about action. It is my contention that is what we are all called to do as well—being grateful is more than just a feeling or a notion. Gratitude calls us to take action.

I leave you with words to a verse from one of my favorite Negro spirituals, often sung during this Lenten season: Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley:

*We must walk this lonesome valley,
We have to walk it by ourselves;
O, nobody else can walk it for us,
We have to walk it by ourselves.*

Friends, Let us be bold, courageous—confident with our attitudes of gratitude!
Amen!

Olanda Carr is the Ministry Relations Officer for the Presbyterian Foundation, serving the East Region. He works with congregations to create a culture of generosity, offers seminars and workshops, develops gifts and fundraising plans for ministries, and provides coaching to finance, stewardship, and endowment committees. Olanda shares his call to the Foundation: "God calls us each day to do new and exciting things. I believe my service with the Foundation is such a call, and it provides me with an opportunity to further God's kingdom and the mission of the PC(USA)." Olanda brings a wealth of community involvement that includes serving as board member on the Catawba Economic Development Association, board member of the campus ministries program, Cooperative Christian Ministry in Higher Education, Vice President of the Charlotte Alumni Chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., and the National MBA Association of Charlotte. He formerly served as treasurer for the homeless services organization, Peter's Place, Inc. and as Vice President of the Kappa Foundation of Charlotte. Olanda also previously served as a commissioner to the 219th General Assembly and as member of the Committee on Theological Education (COTE). Olanda completed his undergraduate studies at NC State University (Industrial Engineering), Montreat College (Business Administration), and also holds an MBA from Montreat College. He is a Ruling Elder at First United Presbyterian Church (Charlotte, NC) and resides in Harrisburg, NC with his wife, Monica.

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