

## **What Can You Give for the Gift of Life?**

Last week I was at the hospital when a stranger on the elevator with me asked, “Father, what is the key to happiness?” Now you don’t usually get that kind of question on an elevator. It’s a profound philosophical question but I had only seconds to respond. So I said to the person, “The key to happiness is saying thank you.”

After I left the hospital and was driving home, I thought about my answer. I realized I had said the right thing. The most joyful, happy people that I have known are filled with gratitude. They are profoundly thankful for their many blessings in life. And even when life can break your heart, they are still thankful.

I remember my Aunt Gloria on the day that my Uncle Joe suffered a fatal heart attack at work. When I saw her that evening, she was naturally shaken and in tears. But then she said to me, “Everyone at work tried so hard to help my husband. They made him comfortable until the medics arrived. The medics came very quickly and did everything they could to revive him. The doctors and hospital staff worked desperately to save his life. When a doctor told me the news that he was dead, he assured me the staff did everything they could to save him. Gary, there are so many wonderful people that cared for my husband. In a strange sort of way, I feel the grace of God this day, and for that I am thankful.”

Yes, being thankful is the key to a happy, joyful life, even in the worst of times.

In our gospel today, Jesus heals ten people with leprosy, but only one returns to give him thanks. Leprosy in the ancient world was an awful disease, not just physically but socially. No kisses, no hugs for people with leprosy. If anyone approached lepers, the law required them to shout “Unclean! Unclean!” lest another human being touch them. Lepers were ostracized from family and friends. They were outcasts from their communities. They were dying human beings struggling to survive one day at a time.

It’s hard for us to imagine how desperate these ten lepers were – desperate enough to cry out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” Some of us know the sound of that cry

because we made it ourselves during moments of quiet desperation. When the world starts to crash on us, and everything we hold dear begins to fall apart, we have cried, “God help me. God, give me strength to face these challenges. Heal my aching body. Ease my anxious mind. I desperately need your peace, power, and presence in my life.”

“Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” Yes, you and I know that cry in our own lives because we have been there.

Jesus hears that cry. He says to the ten lepers, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” So they went, and along the way they were healed. But only one returned to give thanks. Only one came back, and Jesus says that salvation came to the man who gave thanks for the gift of his life.

What can we give for the gift of life? Life – physical life. We waste it. We abuse it. We even become oblivious to it. And yet there are moments when the gift of life is brought home to us – when we begin to appreciate that which we have always taken for granted.

Back in 2015, when I was diagnosed with prostate cancer and elected to have surgery, I was wheeled into a cold, bright operating room and placed naked onto a table. The anesthesiologist then placed a mask over my face and told me to count back from ten. I got to seven before I passed out. The next thing I remember is waking up and seeing Heather’s face. And I thought, “I made it through the surgery!” I was thankful to be alive!

I know a woman who was told by her doctor that she had Stage 4 breast cancer. She thought it was the end, but a few days later the doctor called and apologized for a misdiagnosis. The cancer was not as serious and with treatment, she had every prospect of a full recovery. That news changed the woman’s life, and within a year she felt called to be an Episcopal priest – sharing the gift of life with others.

During World War II, a priest in England saw a young boy come into his church one weekday to pray. The boy remained so long on his knees that the priest went up to him to find out what was the matter. The priest asked, “Do you often come here to pray?”

“I have been here four times in the last five days,” the boy replied.

“Have you anyone fighting at Dunkirk?” asked the priest.

“Yes, sir,” said the boy. “I have been praying for my father. He came home today, and so I came back to thank God for sparing his life.”

Like the one leper who was cleansed in today’s gospel, the boy returned to give thanks to God because he knew what a great gift life is.

What can we give for the gift of life?

Life – new life in Jesus Christ. Physical life is precious, but we Christians know there is another kind of life, spiritual life, or life with God. This is life that never ends, life in all its fullness, life without pain or tears, eternal life that begins in this life but culminates in heaven.

I presume you are here today because somewhere along the way you have said “yes” to Jesus as your Savior and Lord. Somewhere along the way Jesus has touched your life. You have discovered that there is something wonderful about being a Christian. Life, which so many of us fear to lose, takes on security. Life, which frightens us with all the rapid changes in the world, takes on permanence. Life, which contains an unknown future many of us dread, takes on the promise that the best is yet to come. Quite simply, because Jesus died for us, we live with a life that belongs to him.

Dr. Joseph Clarke of Katanga was one of the most famous British missionaries in 19<sup>th</sup> century Africa. One night a group of natives brought a young man to him who was fearfully mangled by a lion. Dr. Clarke worked feverishly to save the man. Night and day he tended his wounds until, months later, the man fully recovered. As he left Dr. Clarke, the young man said, “I will return.”

Years later, a group of natives appeared on Dr. Clarke’s mission. The leader said, “You do not remember me, but I am the man you healed from the lion’s wounds. This is my family. They carry my goods. I am yours; you saved my life. These are yours. All I have is yours.”

We owe everything to God, absolutely everything. That’s the bottom line of the Christian life, isn’t it? Perhaps some of us can say, “I attend church regularly. I give generously to my church. I volunteer in some ministry. I do

what is expected of me.” But is that enough when we consider that God gave us everything?

Most Episcopalians shun extremism. We live by the motto, “Moderation in all things.” However, it’s not extreme to give yourself to God; it’s just gospel.

In his *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius Loyola bids us to gaze upon a crucifix and ask three questions: What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What will I do for Christ? In Christ God has given us everything, absolutely everything. So, the question is: How will I live my life in response to all that God has given me? How will I use the gifts, talents, and resources that I possess to glorify God, to build up the church, and to make this world a little better by my passing through it?

I will never forget speaking with a prominent philanthropist in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He took out his wallet, opened it up, and showed me a cross. I asked him why he kept a cross in his wallet, and I will never forget his answer. He said, “I keep this cross with my money and bank cards to remind me of the price Christ paid for my salvation and of what I owe him in return.”

That man lived as a thankful person for all that God had done for him. He never ceased to marvel at what it cost God to save him.

In a small church in New York City, a homeless man would sit quietly alone in a back pew, never speaking and always leaving as the final hymn was sung. But one Sunday was different. During the worship service, the experience of being unconditionally loved by God overwhelmed him. When the time for the offering came and the plate was passed, he took the plate from the usher, went before the altar, laid the plate reverently at his feet... and stepped into it himself.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
that were an offering far too small;  
love so amazing, so divine,  
demands my life, my soul, my all.<sup>1</sup>

The Rev. Dr. Gary Nicolosi  
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Text – Luke 17:11-19

Proper 23, C

Advent Episcopal Church, Sun City West, AZ

1. Isaac Watts, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” (*The Hymnal* 1982, #474).