

## **An Attitude of Gratitude**

Homily for 28<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

2 Kings 5:14–17

Psalm 98:1–4

2 Timothy 2:8–13

Luke 17:11–19

The very first person to reach the status of billionaire was a man who knew how to set goals and follow through. At the age of 23, he had become a millionaire, by the age of 50 a billionaire. Every decision, attitude, and relationship was tailored to create his personal power and wealth. But three years later at the age of 53 he became ill.

His entire body became racked with pain and he lost all the hair on his head. In complete agony, the world's only billionaire could buy anything he wanted, but he could only digest milk and crackers. An associate wrote, "He could not sleep, would not smile and nothing in life meant anything to him." His personal, highly skilled physicians predicted he would die within a year.

That year passed agonizingly slow. As he approached death he awoke one morning with the vague remembrances of a dream. He could barely recall the dream but knew it had something to do with not being able to take any of his successes with him into the next world. The man who could control the business world suddenly realized he was not in control of his own life.

He was left with a choice.

He called his attorneys, accountants, and managers and announced that he wanted to channel his assets to hospitals, research, and mission work. On that day John D. Rockefeller established his foundation. This new direction eventually led to the discovery of penicillin, cures for current strains of malaria, tuberculosis and diphtheria. The list of discoveries resulting from his choice is enormous.

But perhaps the most amazing part of Rockefeller's story is that the moment he began to give back a portion of all that he had earned, his body's chemistry was altered so significantly that he got better. It looked as if he would die at 53 but he lived to be 98.

Rockefeller learned gratitude and gave back from his wealth. Doing so made him whole. It is one thing to be healed it is another to be made whole. It appears that the one leper who returned and threw himself at Jesus' feet in gratitude was not only healed he was saved by his thanksgiving. "Rise and go," Jesus said, "your faith has made you well."

For all of us, gratitude does not just happen. It is an expression of our faith that is necessary to cultivate. Today's readings encourage us to see gratitude expressed with an attitude that is enthusiastic, energetic and ecstatic.

The word enthusiasm comes from the Greek: “entheos” which means to be “possessed by God”. True enthusiasm grows from knowing that God is the fundamental relationship of my life. No other relationship is more important.

This is something Naaman, the main character in our first reading discovered. He was a Syrian General who had contracted leprosy. He could not find healing in his homeland and so travels to Israel where he is commanded by the Jewish prophet Elisha to wash seven times in the Jordan River. At first he is derisive of such direction, saying the rivers in Syria are far greater than this backwater brook! But get this. In the end he chooses to be obedient. As a result, not only is he healed of his leprosy, but even more importantly his life is now characterized by an enthusiastic gratefulness.

He awakens to a new wonder and praise of the goodness of God.

***“Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel”***

Here is a man who is discovering what it means to live *entheos*.

Before Naaman had washed in the Jordan he was brash and arrogant and puffed up with a kind of nationalistic self-importance. Now that he has met the one and true Lord he is humble and generous. Notice how this influences him. He says to Elisha:

***please accept a present from your servant.***

Notice as well that while Elisha will not receive a gift from Naaman, this spurs Naaman on to even greater enthusiasm and he respectfully asks for a gift from Elisha.

***If not, please let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the Lord.***

Why do you suppose Naaman asked for two mule loads of earth? Now that he is healed he is going to have to head back home to Syria. Within his culture, he believed that gods were tied to their own geographical location. In order to worship the God of Israel in Syria he would need some of Israel’s earth to worship Israel’s God properly.

Now we might think, that’s archaic if not even backward. There is enthusiasm but Naaman, don’t you think that’s a little extreme?

But that’s the point. How often do we hear people say “I can worship my God as fully on a mountain top as in Church?” And that’s the problem. He isn’t “my God”, the very thing Naaman came to see. He is the God of all the earth.

Naaman was discovering something that the biblical witness makes abundantly clear. The places of worship and the forms of worship that are “entheos” are also inconvenient and they interrupt our lives. For Naaman, it meant loading up two mules with earth before he began his

journey northward. For us it means coming to Mass. It requires time, it requires effort. In short it requires enthusiasm.

Gratitude is also energetic. The root of the word energy is “ergon”, a word that means “work”. Gratitude is something that requires energy – work on our part as illustrated when St. Paul says to Timothy:

***<sup>8</sup> Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David—that is my gospel***

Remembering here, as so often in the Bible, is not merely a calling to mind, it is a particular kind of work. It is the fixing of one’s attention, an activation of faith in the wonder of Jesus Christ. In the midst of the problems Timothy was facing it could be possible to forget the very person who has inspired such a revolutionary faith in the first place<sup>1</sup>.

Think of St. Paul. As he writes this he is in jail for his faith. Do you know that Paul spent over half of his life during his years as a Christian in jail? Did jail time deflate him? Did jail time discourage him? Did jail time disillusion him? No, just the opposite. Listen to the energy in these sentences.

***I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained.***

The only other time this word “criminal” is used in the New Testament is in reference to the two crucified next to Jesus, the criminals on his left and right. In the eyes of Nero, who was responsible for Paul’s imprisonment, he was a criminal. But the crooked Emperor’s verdict was not going to deter Paul. No he says, I will endure everything

***for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.***

Here is a man whose words glow with a divine energy because the eternal glory put everything in perspective. It helped him to recognize that even his suffering was being used by Jesus in the service of the Gospel. This is because God’s word, unlike Paul, could not be chained. In the Prophet Jeremiah God speaking through the prophet asks:

***Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces?*<sup>2</sup>**

Here is energy. Here is the work of God and the incredible power of God’s word. It is like fire, a hammer shattering rock. History has shown the gospel’s incredible ability to survive

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<sup>1</sup> Montague, G. T. (2008). *First and Second Timothy, Titus*. (P. S. Williamson & M. Healy, Eds.) (p. 161). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible*. (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Je 23:29). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

persecution and the fate of its preachers. St. Chrysostom captured the influence of this energy when he said:

***“For just as it is impossible to bind a sunbeam or to shut it up within the house, so neither can the preaching of the word be bound.”<sup>3</sup>***

Saint Paul was constantly awakening to new wonder and to praise of the goodness of God. And so his was a life marked by energetic gratitude.

Enthusiastic and energetic gratitude in turn leads to living ecstatically. We see this kind of ecstasy in the one leper who returned to Jesus to thank him. Remember how in the story that it was as the men started walking away from Jesus that they were healed and made well. Nine of the ten just kept on walking away. They kept going their own way. Only this one man turned backed to Jesus. The word ecstasy means to “stand outside of oneself”. The very thing this man was able to do. He realized that his encounter with Jesus meant recognition that required a response. He discovered what both Naaman and Paul also knew, that true ecstasy is the fruit of a life where we discover enthusiasm and energy whereby we pray in the words of today’s Collect:

*May your grace,  
O Lord, we pray,  
at all times go before us and follow after  
and make us always determined to carry out good works.*

Nelson D Rockefeller learned about grace on his seeming death bed in midlife. Like the leper his healing was the opportunity for him to come out of himself and so discovered God’s encompassing grace which he responded to with a determination to carry out good works.

Grateful people are generous people because they have an enthusiasm, energy and ecstasy that grounds their lives as they in turn extend grace to others.

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<sup>3</sup> Montague, G. T. (2008). *First and Second Timothy, Titus*. (P. S. Williamson & M. Healy, Eds.) (p. 162). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.