

I used to drive my kids up to Lake Tahoe, for summer camp. Camp Noel Porter started on Sunday afternoons, so we would jump in the car as soon as morning services were over. I would drive the four hours up, drop the kids off, then drive the four hours back, all before bedtime – hoping for easy traffic.

Those Sundays were long, but they gave me extra time with my kids – quality parenting – and on the way back, time to think.

One year, driving back through the Central Valley, I started thinking about a word I'd heard in Church, that morning. Hugh Hardin had preached, meaning I got to listen. To be honest, I don't remember what Hugh preached on, but I heard him use the word, thanks, somewhere in his sermon, as in to give thanks, to be grateful.

That word stuck with me throughout the day, and as I headed home, doing seventy-five on Highway 80, thinking about things, that simple word – thanks – popped back into my head – No, I should say, it punched me like a right hook to the jaw.

It was as though I'd never considered the word before. And, I'm not sure I had. Not really – because this time, I saw clearly the difference between banal appreciation and spiritual gratitude. The panoramic view, I saw with clarity the beginning and end, start and finish, that all of life is gift.

Complete gift.

Each second here on earth is one more second than I had before, one more second than I either deserved or earned. God, the cosmos, grace, life itself, somehow conspired 52 years ago to breath oxygen and spirit into lungs that were until then a mass and flesh and mere DNA, and suddenly, as new miracle, I had life, and even now, each breath I take is one more than I had before.

All of life is gift – yes, the statement is trite and overused, but the realization of its truth became for me an atomic explosion of grace – And at that moment, driving on Interstate 80, I was completely, and absolutely, grateful.

The tenth leper, this morning, experienced an atomic explosion of grace, and he became completely, and absolutely, grateful.

Last week's Gospel went something like this:

The disciples asked Jesus, Increase our faith.

Jesus answered, you don't need more faith. It only takes a mustard seed's worth, that's all.

Even small faith does heavy lifting, Jesus tells them. Small faith throws mountains into the sea.

You already have faith. Jesus tells us, too. Rather, be worried about your cockiness. You see, the danger is this: throwing mountains into the sea will give you what we used to call, the big head.

Attitude.

Instead, Jesus told the disciples, do what you are supposed to do, and then just say, we are worthless slaves.

Now, this is the point in the story when the ten lepers appeared. Lepers were required by law to identify from afar themselves as nobodies, as worthless slaves, contagious and thus dangerous.

Leper! Leper! Leper!

They alter this wording just a bit for Jesus, yelling at him, Have mercy on us!

Scripture says, Jesus saw them, as in, he saw them for who they were – as people – not a disease. The famous line of cancer patients is this: I am not my cancer.

Jesus saw them as people, not as their disease. Jesus probably didn't use the word, leper.

You see, Jesus saw each of the ten as healed, whole, despite their white, scaly skin, deformed limbs, hollow eyes. He saw them, and instead of saying come here so I can make you better, he said something even more shocking: Go away.

People had been telling them to go away their entire lives – But when Jesus said it, it was something different.

They knew that he knew, they are not their cancer, Jesus sent them to the priests to prove it.

Jesus' words instilled in these people extraordinary faith, a faith that acts. Faith that moves mountains.

Faith is like that: it travels, moves about, requires expression. Don't confuse faith with mere words – like, I believe in God, the Almighty.

Faith is an action verb, not a static noun. That is why you find faith in your movement, not in your passive sentiment.

The ten lepers got up to go, even when they could see plainly they shouldn't. Their skin wasn't smooth and lovely, it was flaky and grossly white.

But, they did go away. And – here is the kicker. They were healed as they went, and one of them moved beyond faith, and into gratitude. One of the lepers saw his healing for what all of life is, a pure, unadulterated gift.

Each breath is one more than I had before, one more than I purchased for myself.

One of my favorite quips goes something like this: I've been rich and I've been poor, but I never let either condition affect my standard of living.

I like it because at some level, that is how we are supposed to live. Not about money, but about satisfaction, contentment, and gratitude.

Paul was in prison, writing to Timothy, yet he exuberantly claimed life in Christ. The Hebrew children were in exile, yet the prophet Jeremiah advised them to become happy. Despite immense and awful suffering: leprosy, prison, and exile – people of faith still cast mountains into the sea, still find peace in abhorrent suffering.

Maybe you read the story in the Chronicle, this week, about the twelve year-old Florida girl with cerebral palsy? Chatari Jones. Other kids bullied Chatari regularly on the school bus. They spit in her hair, and called her names.

This week, Chatari publicly thanked her bullies. She thanked them because, she said, she is stronger and now and is able to defend other kids who get bullied.

And I'm wondering, in the midst of such suffering how do you reach such a spiritual state of gratitude? There is only one way that I know of: and that is to see things that are hidden. To find a deeper truth in the midst of difficult times.

Don't get me wrong – we should and must stand-up against injustice. Children should not be bullied. Paul should not have been imprisoned, and the Hebrew children should not have been deported to Babylon.

But there they were, and here we are –

So what do you do with a life when it is difficult?

Do you become angry and bitter, or is there some way to look beyond the circumstance, and find meaning?

Can you see, even now, that every breath you take is gift, one more than the one before? That God has conspired with the universe to give to you far more grace than you can imagine, far more than faith that merely moves mountains?

Even now, here today, you have the breath of God in your lungs – the very breath of God.