

**"Gratitude and Loss"
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What does gratitude have to do with salvation. What has loss to do with healing?

For us gratitude is often an ought or a should. It's something we're told to do or be, sometimes shamed when we don't feel it. Those of us who are parents often feel most keenly the need to instill in our children a sense of gratitude for the gifts they receive, especially for their birthday or at Christmas. Or sometimes we experience that familiar feeling that we've failed when they don't write those notes.

I fear that what our children "see through" is our own lack of gratitude and they imitate it by resisting what we require as exercises in obedience rather than thankfulness. Where does genuine gratitude come from? Is it something we can teach or force on our children?

At its heart gratitude is a radical sense of dependence. It's a recognition that what appears in the surrounding world; what comes to us as a result of our hard work; the relationships that sustain and support us; all of these are gifts. But because the question of a Giver is always at issue, gratitude fully expressed posits an Other who is the source of all gifts, the Other we call God. Sometimes a deep loss we experience can actually cause us to stumble over our radical dependence and thus throw us into the arms of God.

Take the story of Ruth and Naomi. In the depths of serious their risk, having lost everything, these two find each other as gift. Naomi and her two sons had moved to the foreign territory of Moab, in the country of Israel's enemies. There her sons, Mahlon and Chilion had married local women, Ruth and Orpah. When Naomi's husband and sons all die and the three women are left without support and protection, Naomi decides to return to the land of Israel.

A little like the prodigal son she calculates that a return to her homeland where she is known and will be welcomed according to the just ways of the community will give her a better chance at what life she has left. She urges her widowed daughters-in-law to go back to their own homes there to find suitable husbands for themselves from among their own people to give them children and take care of them. Orpah reluctantly takes her advice and leaves. But for Ruth there is no calculation about which choice might best serve her needs. Rather there is openness, mutuality and a shared dependence on an unknown future together with

Naomi and Naomi's God. In words that have become familiar to us, Ruth urges her mother-in-law to take her back to the Land with her. She says:

Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
Where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.

She has recognized in the faith of her mother-in-law a hope for her own future. Her response at this point is that of gratitude. Gratitude is a response to the past that opens us to a hopeful future. Loss can wound us and keep us from turning toward the future for fear of more loss. Only as we celebrate and acknowledge the depths of our loss, the loss of who we have been in our now lost life, only then can we orient ourselves toward a hopeful future. Only then, free of that which is now lost, can we receive our new selves as a gift.

Sr. Joan Chittister writes, "One aspect of the grace of loss is grief; the other, reassessment of the past. Both are essential dimensions of the project. Unless we allow ourselves to grieve the loss, to admit its effects on our own lives, our own souls, we cannot make good decisions in the future. And unless we begin to reassess the past, we cannot know who we were in whole before we became the thing we've lost. We will never know the full measure of what we have to bring to the rest of life."¹

The story of the ten lepers underlines the way receiving ourselves after a loss as something entirely new, as a gift, can liberate us from old self-destructive patterns and structures. We have grown to accept certain things uncritically and unconsciously about ourselves as given, as the way things are. Usually we've learned this reality from our family of origin and the assumptions of the social circumstances in which we grew up.

For the ten lepers we might call this the "sacrificial system." That is health and well being in the society in which Jesus lived depended on the symbolic transactions which took place at the temple. The purpose of sacrifice was to cleanse the nation of its pollution by corruption. Evil, sin and death were feared and had to be kept away from life and the righteous. Illness of all kinds especially physically obvious diseases like skin afflictions were signs of sin and a threat to

¹ Joan Chittister, "The Story of Ruth, Moments of Loss and Faith" at www.csec.org/csec/sermon/chittister_4415.htm

society. You could not touch an afflicted person because you would become contaminated and equally an outcast.

Jesus completely disregards these structural assumptions and rules in society and by doing so cancels them as exposes them as so much oppressive superstition. He reverses the flow of infection. When Jesus touches the sick his righteousness flows into them. He “infects” them with health and well being. And he restores them to their position of acceptance in society.

Curiously in our gospel story of the cleansing of the ten lepers, the unclean keep their distance and Jesus speaks to them, ordering them to show themselves to the priests, to certify that they are restored, that they no longer have skin lesions or flaking. He makes use of the sacrificial system itself to restore them to their position in society. The assumption, I think, is that, having lost their symptoms, they simply return to their old lives. All except one.

The Samaritan returns to offer thanks to Jesus. Perhaps because as a Samaritan he is still an outcast, he gets it. Perhaps because by losing the companionship of the other outcasts and with no identity to return to in society, he recognizes that Jesus’ love and acceptance is the source of life and of well-being and not the sacrificial system to which the others return. It’s notable that the Greek word for “whole” or “well” used by Jesus when he says to the Samaritan who returns to express his gratitude, “Your faith has made you well,” is the same word translated in other places as “salvation.” While the word used to describe their healing as they went to show themselves to the priests is the technical word for ritual cleansing. The healing that Jesus affirms for the grateful Samaritan is more profound, more total, than that for the ten before this one returned. He is healed, liberated, out of the “sacrificial system” itself.

What I suggested earlier I’m ready to try to say more clearly now. All of us have a kind of “sacrificial system” that we have internalized. It functions to secure our identity, our place in our families, among our friends, co-workers, in our community. Loss is a contagion that disrupts our identity and our place in pattern of our own life. Like a leper in Israelite society, loss renders us out of place in our own life.

The truth is that the unclean in every society, however they may be defined by that culture, are the “identified patients” of that society. They carry the “shadow” for the culture and thus provide a necessary sacrificial function. Some in our community are given the lot of carrying by their own loss the projection of the losses that all of us experience. I think of those who have suffered spousal rejection and divorce and who can be so thoughtlessly shunned by their dearest

friends whose fear of the contagion of infidelity, betrayal and loss now isolates them from those who were once so close.

Our Eucharistic worship is a powerful practice of acknowledging and recollecting our loss. We re-enact our loss symbolically, for instance, by intentionally giving away our money at every Eucharist. I know some of us really grieve that loss, and well we should. It is our substance. It is the fruit of our labor. And we do what Joan Chittister calls “reassessing the past” by acknowledging our faults and failures, certainly cause for grief. Yet only then can we begin to know something of “the full measure of what we have to bring to the rest of our life.”

Like Ruth with Naomi we assert our relationship to the community of the People of God. Like the Samaritan leper we lay claim to a new kind of relationship, a new kind of relationship with friends and family and even with ourselves. A relationship no longer characterized by the fear of loss and by an internalized “sacrificial system” that promises to keep us safe from loss. And by our eucharistic gesture of gratitude and mutual inter-dependence we receive our new self as a gift. Like the leper who returns to give thanks, we remove our faith from the power of the sacrificial system. It’s as if we receive our identity in the hand, anew each week, not as a given, or as something we have grasped in the manner of our competitive world, but as Christ, the gift of our own salvation which we return gratefully to receive again and again. AMEN.

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