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Luke 17:11-19

A LIFE WORTH LIVING

An unusual class is being offered at Yale University. Starting in 2014, Yale began offering a course called "Life Worth Living." It was conceived by Yale Divinity School theologian, Miroslav Volf, in an effort to supply something he and his colleagues thought was missing in the modern secular university: a class that directly asks questions about the ultimate purpose of life and about what constitutes a good life. The course has become hugely popular among students, attracting more than 250 who must apply to occupy one of the 60 spots. One student stated the importance of such a class: "I don't think there is any other class at the school that grapples with the fundamental questions: What do you want in life, and is that worth wanting?"

It used to be that people would turn to their communities of faith to help them answer such questions. Yet, either they have found those communities unsatisfactory in helping them with such questions or they simply stopped showing up to hear the answers. And universities and colleges, organized as they are to impart knowledge, have typically fared no better in addressing these matters. Thus, the impetus for this course. According to Professor Volf, among the students such questions about ultimate ends tended to break out in late-night conversations among friends or would arise years later in life at a moment of doubt, when people wondered: Does what I've done with my life really matter? What does it all add up to?

In the course Life Worth Living, students are given a brief look at eight different accounts of the life worth living: Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Marxism, scientific naturalism, utilitarianism, and the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. In the course, the students

are pressed to consider each perspective as a live option for themselves, to engage in respectful conversations with those holding different perspectives, to learn how to have their views challenged, and to consider the inconsistencies of their personal claims. Perhaps it is not surprising that with such a degree of sharing, strong ties form among the class members. At the close of the course, Professor Volf offered the students some conclusions the course: "One lesson of the class, he suggested, is that the good life involves caring for something outside yourself, whether that is other people or the planet. A second lesson is that everyone's life is enmeshed in social systems and shaped by other people. That recognition, he said, should inspire a sense of gratitude." Thus, a life worth living could be summed up as one marked by "care and gratitude."

It seems timely to focus on the issue of gratitude as we head into the Thanksgiving holiday. As we sit down at our holiday tables this week, we are encouraged to consider all the things for which we are grateful. It is a wonderful premise for a holiday when you think about it: a holiday based not on buying or consuming--that will come the next day--but simply on the important need to be grateful. Of course, the idea of the holiday is not that we are grateful just one day a year, but that we might incorporate gratitude as part of our lives every day of the year. If we desire a life worth living, gratitude is a necessary ingredient.

The reason I think gratitude offers the key to a life worth living is that it is not just a terminal emotion. It doesn't just end with feeling grateful. But rather gratitude's benefits, gratitude's dividends, are many and profound. Take humility as an example. Gratitude inspires humility. A person who is grateful acknowledges that he or she has received something that they themselves could not generate. You needed help when you moved or after you lost your job or when your first baby was born, and others stepped in with the help. Or you saw that sunrise or

the autumn trees aflame with color and you were humbled by the gift, the blessing of beauty that you could not generate yourself. And the recognition of the blessing you have received from others is humbling. You have received something important and valuable from others.

Gratitude moves us to appreciate that we are part of communities, that we are part of relationships of dependency. We are not self-sufficient. So gratitude strengthens our bonds with one another.

There is also a component to gratitude that is life-affirming. When we are grateful for something, for a person in our life, for something someone has done, for something we've been privileged to do or have, when we are grateful it leads us into joy, into wonder, into greater connection with life. And this gratitude inspires us to life-affirming action. When so much in our world is life-denying, when the trials and hardships of our own lives can be life-depleting, gratitude is a "yes" to life. Gratitude is life-affirming.

We can see these aspects of gratitude at play in our story today from Luke's gospel. Jesus heals ten lepers from their disfiguring disease--a disease that not only robbed them of their health but which also meant they were social outcasts. They could no longer live with their families, hold a job, or be part of the community. They were forced to live on the literal edges of their towns, in poverty and need. Jesus heals ten lepers and sends them off to see the priest who would be able to certify their healing and allow them to return to society. All ten were healed, but only one turned back and offered thanksgiving to Jesus when he saw that he was healed. The one who turned back, the Samaritan, displayed humility, throwing himself at Jesus' feet in recognition of the important blessing he had just received. The Samaritan's gratitude revealed a dependency he had upon another--Jesus--and strengthened his connection to Jesus and to God.

And the Samaritan's gratitude inspired him to stop, to return to the giver of this amazing gift, and to offer thanks--to make his own gesture affirming life and the giver of life.

Now of course, the other nine who were healed had to have been extraordinarily happy at their change of circumstances. They had to have been elated, just like this Samaritan was. But were they grateful? I'm not sure they were grateful in the way we are talking about genuine gratitude that is rooted in humility, a sense of community, and which inspires us to make life-affirming gestures of our own.

When the Samaritan returns and offers his gratitude to Jesus, Jesus says to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." The word Jesus uses here for "made well" can also be translated as "your faith has saved you," or "your faith has made you whole." Ten lepers were healed. Ten lepers received a blessing. But only one was made whole. And the difference, the difference was gratitude.

We may know many blessings in life. We may know the love of family and friends, good health, material prosperity. We may go to college, hold a good job. We may know achievements in life. But without gratitude, we are not whole, we are not saved for the life worth living. Gratitude rooted in humility, gratitude that strengthens our ties with others and our God, gratitude that moves us to life-affirming actions is the key to a life worth living.

The key aspect about gratitude is that it is not merely an emotion, it is not simply something we feel at a particular moment, or a thought we register in our minds when prompted, but rather gratitude is a posture of living. Gratitude is a posture of living. It infuses all of our encounters with others, even the most mundane of daily interactions. It informs how we use our money and our time. It dictates how we care for the earth. Gratitude takes nothing for granted, not the dinner someone prepared for us, not the dishes someone washed for us, not the door

someone held for us. Gratitude is a posture for living. And that posture is found in the Samaritan leper, on his knees in thankfulness before the giver of all good gifts.

Today we are offering our Stewardship pledges for next year. Often we think about Stewardship as a time for giving. We know the church has financial needs and we are beckoned to give our resources to help meet those needs. But Stewardship is really not about giving. Giving is merely the by-product. Stewardship is fundamentally about gratitude. Stewardship is not just a campaign we launch once a year to get people to give their money. Rather, stewardship is a spiritual matter that addresses the issue of what we do with everything with which we have been blessed: our lives, our talents, our possessions, our time, our hearts, our minds, our money. And good stewardship of our gifts begins with gratitude--a gratitude rooted in humility that we have received blessings of great value, a gratitude that strengthens our bonds with one another and our God, a gratitude that inspires life-affirming action. Our stewardship gifts are genuine gestures of gratitude.

You see, God doesn't just want our gifts. God wants our hearts. God desires for you and me to know a life worth living.