

***Gospel: Luke 17:11-19***

Leaf peepers are a strong part of the autumn economy in New England, and I like to be one of them when time allows. Festivals, parades, harvest-themed fairs are all timed to coincide with nature's annual blaze into rich, warm autumn's colors. But the beauty of fall is fragile; it only takes a single hard frost and a cold rain to drop all that brilliant foliage to the forest floor, creating a colorful, if soggy, carpet underfoot. What was enjoyed as ethereally beautiful is now cursed for the work of raking, piling, scooping and bagging it represents. When fall leaves are still on the trees, they are treasured. Above our heads they are sacred; under our feet they are profane. And when they fall to the ground, they are dirt.

These are some of the most famous lines in the world of social anthropology in the 20th century. They come from the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas, who made them into a rule of social organization: "Where there is dirt, there is system." That is, in human society order is prior to disorder and so defines it.

In postmodern culture, dirt is a part of the system as well. Everywhere we see evidence that there is a desire for more and more grease, grime, gossip.

How many tabloid trash magazines dish the dirt in our faces as we stand in the checkout line? "Michael Jackson Wants to Live with Leprechauns," "Statue of Al Gore Cries Real Tears," "Pack of Wild Cocker Spaniels Terrorizes Wyoming," and "I was Barbara Boxer's and Dick Cheney's Love Child."

How many entertainment/celebrity gossip shows fill our TV screens each day, and how many new Web sites offer the "real" story behind still breaking headlines? How many careers have been started and ended by gossip? How many Wall Street fortunes have been made and lost on the dirt of rumor and innuendo?

We are so inundated by self-pollution that we require far more grace than Dorothy Parker's self-deprecating epitaph on her tombstone, which says, "Excuse my dust." What a few years ago we would never have even said in polite conversations has today become the vernacular. (Including, perhaps, a "love-child" joke from a pulpit.) As one contemporary leper, a homeless street kid, put it in a poem:

"I'm falling  
No gravity in my life  
Like dust  
Swept under the carpet."<sup>1</sup>

The Catholic tradition provides us with a phrase and prayer that is used to protect us from the sludge that seeps into our lives. The Latin phrase *Asperges me, Domine* ("Wash me, Lord") was common in Jesus' day because the highway was very dirty, making constant foot-washing a necessity.

Postmodern culture has brought us back to the first century. It, too, is extremely dirty. Our sandaled feet and Birkenstock spirits need this prayer: *Asperges me, Domine*. Each one of us supposedly has an average of five pounds of flaking skin that we will wash off. But more than that, we accumulate many more pounds of crud and dirt on our souls from the highway of life that need cleansing if we are to be whole and well and alive and in-tune.

Yet, as the morning's text has taught us, our "quest" for cleansing, our rituals of washing, are incomplete without that return to the source of our healing for a final, cleansing exercise: giving thanks. Without the integration of gratitude into our lives, there can be no lasting wholeness or holiness, health or wellness. From a biblical perspective, to say Asperges Me, Domine is incomplete without celebrating those who made our newness and wellness possible.

Viktor Frankl, the eminent psychologist, provides a revealing example of what it means to express gratitude for wholeness and wellness. Frankl, who died at the age of 91, was a prisoner in the concentration camps during World War II. Dr. Gordon Allport, in his preface to Frankl's significant work, "Man's Search for Meaning"<sup>2</sup> says that "there he found himself stripped to a literally naked existence. His father, mother, brother and his wife died in the camps or were sent to the gas ovens, so that except for his sister, his entire family perished in these camps. How could he, every possession lost, every value destroyed, suffering from hunger, cold and brutality, hourly expecting extermination, how could he find life worth preserving? A psychiatrist who personally has faced such extremity is a psychiatrist worth listening to."

Frankl answers Allport's question when he recounts his experience just following his liberation from the camps:

"One day, a few days after the liberation, I walked through the country, past flowering meadows, for miles and miles, toward the market town near the camp. Larks rose to the sky and I could hear their joyous song. There was no one to be seen for miles around; there was nothing but the wide earth and sky and the larks' jubilation and the freedom of space.

"I stopped, looked around and up to the sky—and then I went down on my knees. At that moment there was very little I knew of myself or of the world—I had but one sentence in mind—always the same: 'I called to the Lord from my narrow prison and he answered me in the freedom of space.'

"How long I knelt there and repeated this sentence, memory can no longer recall. But I know that on that day, in that hour, my new life started. Step for step I progressed until I again became a human being."<sup>3</sup>

Frankl, released from arguably the most "leprous" episode in the history of humankind, could do nothing but kneel before his Creator in a posture of overwhelming gratitude. From that point of thanksgiving, he marked his renewal as a human being. Likewise, our wellness, our wholeness, our very healing and health, our becoming wholly human depend on our being able to celebrate and give thanks for the "freedom of space," for the liberation and cleansing that has been brought to us, often mediated by influential people we love and the people who love us.

Jesus cleansed the leper, and the leper came back to give thanks.

When we are touched and cleansed, releasing us from the prisons of grease, grime and gossip, it is done through the work of the divine spark in people. Through relationships which have changed us. Unfortunately, we often forget to go back and offer our gratitude to these people who have changed our lives.

Years after some of them are gone from us, their voices come back to us with words of advice and caring, imparting words we have long forgotten. Looking into the bathroom mirror one morning, I could see my unkempt and haggard image with a twisting mouth under bulging eyes. My father's voice was very clear in my head: "Never place the Listerine on the same shelf with the Vitalis, or one day you will wake up in a world of unhappy confusion."

Sue Bender wrote a book called, “Everyday Sacred,”<sup>4</sup> in which she describes how she began to develop her sense of gratitude. This could be called, “The Story of the Exploding Turkey.” She wrote:

“Last month my husband Richard and I decided, at age 60 and 63, it was finally time to be grown-up and responsible. Neither of us is practical about business or financial matters. We went to a lawyer and started the process of making a will and a living trust for our sons.”

“What would you like to do in case there’s an ‘exploding turkey’?” the lawyer asked.

“Exploding turkey?” I asked.

“What if the whole family was together at Thanksgiving and the turkey exploded?” he asked. “If the four of you were killed at that moment, who would you want to have your worldly goods?”

“That turned out to be a terrific assignment. A chance to think about the people in our lives, a chance to be grateful and express our gratitude.

“I decided to create a new ritual. I would stop at the end of the day, even a particularly difficult day, and make a list: a gratitude list. Who or what do I have to be grateful for today?”<sup>5</sup>

That’s why you have a blank sheet of paper in your bulletin this morning. I’d like us to take a minute on Thanksgiving Sunday to play the role of the Samaritan by returning to the one living person who has been a healing force and presence in your life. Some of us will think of our parents. For the purpose of this exercise, let’s assume that our parents have been there for us as the wonderful parents they are. Let’s go beyond the parental influence to that of a friend, teacher or mentor.

I’m going to exercise the greatest amount of self-control a preacher can muster. I’m going to shut up and say nothing for a minute. Please do three things: Write the name of this person on this paper. Then, jot down a brief paragraph summarizing this person’s role in bringing cleansing and wholeness to your life and express your gratitude for him or her. Finally, think about contacting this person during this week of Thanksgiving to share your thoughts. I have already done this in preparation for today.

*(one minute)*-----

Let this be a closing moment where we feel the need, no matter how hard things are for us during these unstable times, to return for a moment and give thanks for our wholeness, for those who help us achieve it, and to God.

### ***Sermon Resources***

- 1) Jim Goldberg, “Raised by Wolves: Photographs and Documents of Runaways,” New York: Scalo, 1995, 194-195.
- 2) Viktor Frankl, “Man’s Search for Meaning,” New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984. Page 7.
- 3) Ibid. Page 96
- 4) Sue Bender, “Everyday Sacred,” HarperSanFrancisco, 1995.
- 5) Ibid. Page 110