

**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**



SERMON

October 9, 2022

# The Ordinary Life of Grace

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: October 11, 2022

During the pandemic, as houses of worship closed their doors, people sought divine connection and community in other venues. This was true regardless of religious affiliation or none. People turned to prayer in all manners.

Use of the website pray.com exploded. People downloaded the app to their smart devices. Alongside apps for their bank and Google maps, they had a prayer app.

In 2016, the year this app was launched, venture capitalists put a miserly six million to fund religion-focused tech. In Silicon Valley terms, that might as well be zero. The year COVID changed our daily routines and Google searches for religious terms grew at an exponential rate – words as simple as “prayer” or “salvation” or “God.” That year investors poured \$50 million into new technologies for faith to feed our appetites.

By 2021, the money flowing to new online technologies for sacred content more than tripled to \$175 million.

People care about faith. They care about navigating their lives on earth for themselves and with one another. They care about their spiritual health and divine destiny. By your very presence this morning and enduring commitment to this church, we know it is true.

Pray.com provides access to all sorts of free resources and encourages you to write your own prayer requests. The privacy policy for its free service, which rarely anyone reads

and only clicks “yes,” provides none of the confidentiality of HIPPA in health care or the trust as if you are praying with your pastor.

Since it is free, you may not be surprised to learn this for-profit company makes money by listening in on prayers. They discern two common prayers. The first is “help me, help me, help me.”

I dare to say, everyone worshipping with us has at some time in their life felt driven to their knees with a plea for help. Health. Family. Broken relationships. Desperate dreams. Loneliness. Let me pause there. Just a few minutes ago, our liturgy offered quiet time in prayer for you to speak your heart, or as the Apostle Paul wrote, “in sighs too deep for words.”

All the gospels describe Jesus devoting time to pray. He asked God for help. He instructs his disciples to ask for help.

Today’s lectionary reading offers insight into an encounter along the road Jesus has with ten men whose skin disease separated them from family and community. This brief passage is framed by his teachings of the power of prayer and is followed by parables that celebrate humility.

Before I read, please join me in our prayer for illumination.

*Dear God, accept our prayers of help as we gather to hear your word for we seek to know you. Silence in us any noise that distracts us. Send your spirit among us and between these*

*ancient words that we encounter your son. May his words heal us and save us. Amen.*

### **Luke 17:11-19**

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. <sup>12</sup>As he entered a village, ten men with a skin disease approached him. Keeping their distance, <sup>13</sup>they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” <sup>14</sup>When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean.

<sup>15</sup>Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. <sup>16</sup>He prostrated himself at Jesus’s feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.

<sup>17</sup>Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? So where are the other nine? <sup>18</sup>Did none of them return to give glory to God except this foreigner?” <sup>19</sup>Then Jesus said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has saved you.”

The great theologian Karl Barth was fond of saying that the basic human response to God is not fear and trembling, not guilt and dread, but thanksgiving. Among all the volumes Barth wrote he fundamentally asks, “What else can we say to what God gives us but to stammer praise?”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1980), 564.

Another writer, C.S. Lewis who penned the eternally popular *Chronicles of Narnia*, also wrote extensively of what he learned by becoming a Christian. Sometimes the eye of the person who is new to faith sees more than those of us raised within.

From studying the Psalms, in particular, C.S. Lewis noticed that even tragic prayers of need – healing, protection, lament – also included thanks. No matter how the psalmist’s prayers begin, they conclude with humble awe and gratitude for what God has done and can continue to do.

Turning to God to heal one’s life leads to gratitude and gratitude begets – a great biblical word – gratitude gives birth to wellness. Lewis saw this fundamental truth in his life and writes: “I noticed how the humblest and at the same time most balanced minds praised most; while the cranks, misfits and malcontents praised least. Praise almost seems to be inner health made audible.”<sup>2</sup>

In concert with today’s healing story and these theologians, the second most common prayer gleaned by the technologists at pray.com after “help me, help me” is “thank you, thank you.” When left on our own to state our heart-felt desires, we ask for help and we express gratitude. When we shape our lives with these two prayers, we find our life grow rich and expand.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (London: G.Bles, 1958), 81.

<sup>3</sup> [When You Pray to God Online, Who Else Is Listening? - Freakonomics](#)

This is where we return to this story of healing Jesus performed along his journey to Jerusalem.

Geographically, Luke's writer situates this encounter between Samaria and Galilee. Anyone who's looked at a map or traveled from Galilee to Jerusalem knows it really doesn't make sense. For this to occur, either Jesus doubled back or took a long detour, or entered a frontier.

More likely the writer disrupts our sense of order so we recognize Jesus will step into a liminal place of nowhere to meet people. Nowhere is a place we sometimes find ourselves.

Ten men with a skin disease linger in there, no longer allowed within the confines of polite society. People believe they are contagious and ostracize them because of their skin.

When these men see Jesus, rather than announce the danger they represent by shouting the obligatory "unclean, unclean" to warn anyone approaching, they call out "have mercy." Our version of "help me."

With as little as a wave, Jesus responds. He sends them on a mission to receive the equivalent of an admission slip from a priest so they may return to their lives. They all become clean.

One returns. Of all the ten, only the Samaritan, a man burdened with two social stigmas, approaches Jesus. In addition to his skin condition, now healed, he carried an

enduring ethnic heritage that could alienate him from society for life.

Before and beyond the first century, Samaritans were perceived as enemies to exclude and rejected by God based upon an ancient legacy. And yet, Jesus always lifts them, includes them.

The Samaritan, alone, offers thanks. We could speculate all day of why the others did not return to thank Jesus. Perhaps they just followed one another with a crowd mentality. Perhaps they do not understand the essence of gratitude in maintaining relationships. Perhaps they felt entitled to their healing.

We know that the lone Samaritan is grateful and because of that receives more. His plea for mercy led to healing and his gratitude reveals faith in Jesus. This gratitude offers something the other nine miss out on: salvation. He falls into humble submission and praise for the gift of life. Jesus raises him by grace.

So now it is more than just a story about healing.

This story is about grounding our walk of life with Jesus in continual prayers of “help me” and “thank you.” It is a story of the power of gratitude to entirely reshape your disposition towards other people and to God.



We see this in our time.

A woman was hospitalized after an accident that left her unable to walk. The choices for healing implied more pain with limited possible benefit. Fear and isolation seemed to deepen as she lay in her sterile room.

In the swirl of anxiety, she turned to God in prayer with a simple “help me. Help me decide what to do. Help me in the days and weeks ahead.” Her care givers also joined the prayer with “help me” to be God’s agents in her healing.

She submitted her life to her creator who hold the power to heal and is the ultimate place of salvation. In this nowhere land of suffering, faith reminded her of being held in God’s hand regardless of her ability to walk again. Their collective prayers turned to “thank you” as she felt God’s presence.

A frantic parent fears for their teen. Too many signs of self-harm seep through the edges of life even though this youth denies their anxiety. The stigma of needing counseling seems insurmountable.

The parent whispers prayers of “help me, help my child.” God hears these whispers as do others. Healing from anxiety may be as fraught with pain as recovering from broken bones but connecting with people who care leads to gratitude for their presence and wisdom.

When we put down the burden of self-reliance or drop any sense of entitlement, we fall to the hard ground of humility before God. Crying out may shake us to the core, and when we have such humility, our core becomes filled with grace.

When prayers of thanks rise, your soul heals, and the physical conditions of the person praying becomes less important. Wellness can only spring from faith because faith understands life to be a gift from a loving God.

Faith prepares us to join Jesus in his healing ministry where the broken are made whole. When we recognize that life is a gift, the only possible response is gratitude to God and to share this with others.

The Reverend Tom Rook changed my life with what he taught of prayer.

Raised a penitent Lutheran, I'd always started my personal prayers with confession. "Oh, God, I am not worthy. I've sinned." And in all honesty, I'd lose interest in continuing. Why appeal to someone when I think I can never measure up or be worthy?

Tom taught, always find the prayer of thanks. When I followed him from room to room in a hospital, he prayed for all manner of healing and always offered a word of thanks. Not in some Pollyanna pep talk but standing on the solid ground of grace from which we'd never fall.

To intentionally pray for help and offer thanks changes an individual's life. With gratitude we can receive. With gratitude we can give. Knowing all that we have and all that we are is a gift, we become disciples of Jesus, introducing others to his grace in the most delightful ways.



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