**Cultivating Gratitude and Letting Go of Fear**

**Luke 19:28-44**

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Palm Sunday, April 5, 2020

“I know I should be happy, but I’m not.”

Those are the words that Charlie Brown says as he sits down at Lucy’s psychiatry booth at the beginning of “A Charlie Brown Christmas”.  Do you remember? It’s Christmas time and Charlie Brown is feeling low. His sad mood is only exacerbated when he finds Snoopy decorating his doghouse in hopes of winning big money in a Christmas decoration contest.  And then he encounters little sister Sally who wants help writing a letter to Santa requesting money - preferably Hamiltons and Jacksons. Finally, Charlie Brown seeks out Lucy to help him figure out what’s bothering him.

Lucy, in all her wisdom, offers advice for a nickel.  She assumes that Charlie Brown’s problem is that he is afraid of something.  The options she throws out are like an encyclopedia of phobias. “Are you afraid of responsibility?  You could have hypengyophobia. How about cats? If you’re afraid of cats, you have ailurophasia. Maybe you have thalassophobia.  This is fear of the ocean. Or maybe you have pantophobia. Do you think you have pantophobia?” “What’s that,” asks Charlie Brown.  “The fear of everything,” Lucy responds. “That’s it!”

While Lucy proposes some pretty unusual fears, study after study shows that in the U.S. our most common fears are heights, insects and other creepy crawlies, and, my personal favorite, speaking in public.

Neither Lucy nor any of the studies I found in perusing the internet mentions the fear that is gripping so many of us right now.  Though we tend to make light of a lot of fears, we are facing something that is very real and very serious here in Michigan, in the US, and around the world - a global pandemic of a virus known as Covid-19.  Four weeks ago, on the first Sunday in Lent, we began our Lenten sermon series called “Cultivating and Letting Go”. At that time, Covid-19 had not yet arrived in the state of Michigan. We knew it was coming.  It was just a matter of time, but we still had a certain amount of blissful ignorance about it. Now, cases of Covid-19 are increasing exponentially and we are, of course, afraid.

Over these weeks of Lent, we’ve talked about cultivating different spiritual practices to strengthen our relationship with God while letting go of those ideas and behaviors that stand between us and God.  We’ve explored cultivating faith, peace, relationships, and appreciation and letting go of temptation, expectation, self, and judgment. Today, we look at cultivating gratitude and letting go of fear.

Today is also Palm Sunday.  In the story of Jesus’ life and ministry, this is the day we remember his triumphal ride into Jerusalem when the people cheered and praised him.  It is the beginning of Holy Week - a day of joy and celebration that introduces a week of growing despair.

This year, in reading Luke’s account of this day, I found myself thinking a lot about what this time must have been like for the disciples.  It’s interesting, Luke describes the people gathered along the road cheering for Jesus as “the whole crowd of disciples”, but my heart has been with the original twelve - those he picked to be his friends, his students, his companions through his three years of teaching and healing.

I’m sure they were part of the celebrations.  Yet, they must have also known that there was trouble ahead.  They had seen how the Pharisees tested Jesus. They knew that he had been pushing limits and breaking rules since his ministry began.  He healed on the Sabbath. He shared meals with prostitutes and tax collectors. He touched lepers and women and other unclean people. People were even calling him the King of the Jews - and that would upset not just the temple officials but the Romans as well.  A crowd this size would only draw more attention to him.

So, yes, his disciples must have been afraid and unsure of exactly what might be coming.  Would the temple officials try to keep Jesus out? Would the Roman guards arrest him? Would the rest of them be safe or would they get in trouble if he did?

I feel like a lot of us are living in a similar place right now.  We know Covid-19 is spreading quickly. Most of us now know someone who has been exposed or we know someone who knows someone.  We anticipate that things will get worse before they get better, but there is so much we don’t know. Will I get sick? Will someone I love get sick?  How long will we have to stay in our homes? What if I lose my job? How will we survive financially? What is going to happen to the economy? When will it end?

But, here is my observation about the disciples on this day we call Palm Sunday.  Even though they must be frightened. Even though Jesus has been talking about his own death and preparing them for it.  Even though they are sure there will be trouble in Jerusalem. They still join in the celebration, joyfully praising God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen.  They let go of fear long enough to be grateful.

I’ve heard it said that gratitude is the antidote to fear.  Here is why I believe that is true. Fear is about what we anticipate might happen.  Fear focuses us on the future and all that is unknown. Fear tries to fill in the blanks when we don’t know how the story is going to unfold.

Gratitude brings us into the now.  This day, this moment in time. Gratitude pulls us out of worry about what might be and into appreciation for what is.  Gratitude directs our attention away from what threatens us and invites us to reflect on and name all the ways in which we are thankful.  And though it can’t change what the future holds, it can change how we feel in the present by reminding us of all the gifts God has given us - the people, relationships, opportunities and privileges we have been blessed with.

So, how do you cultivate gratitude in the days of Covid-19?  You start with what I mentioned earlier - taking time to reflect on and name what you are grateful for.  Make a list - put it on your refrigerator to remind you. Start a gratitude journal. Begin each day with a prayer of thanks for just one thing that you hold close.  Make up a mantra. When you begin to worry about the future, say something like, “Today I am grateful for…” It sounds a little silly, but it really does work! Alternatively, consider visual journaling as a way of expressing gratitude.  Draw what you are grateful for and put the drawing near where you sit to pray.

If you’re having trouble coming up with things that you are grateful for or you just need a fresh perspective, seek out beauty.  Go for a walk and look for signs of spring. Take an online tour of one of the great European art museums. Listen to music that touches or inspires you.  Alternatively, go back and look at old photo albums and reflect on all the incredible people you’ve met and opportunities you’ve had in your life. Or, just spend a minute or two looking at someone you love - soaking in the simple beauty of your child asleep or your spouse concentrating on a book or your dog running up to greet you.  There is beauty around us every second of the day if we take the time to see it - and that is definitely something to be grateful for.

Another avenue into gratitude for many people is mindfulness.  A simple app like “Headspace” or “Calm” can lead you into a mindfulness practice that stills your fears and helps you make space in your head and your heart for gratitude.  Similarly, any creative act - drawing, painting, singing, writing poetry - leads you to look at the world differently or to connect more deeply with your spirituality which, in turn, can put you in touch with gratitude.

Finally, I would encourage you to take advantage of opportunities to worship during this Holy Week.  The days leading up to Easter are not easy. The story of Jesus’ arrest, mock trial, and crucifixion is filled with fear, grief, and betrayal.  And yet, when you allow yourself to sit with the last events of Jesus’ life, with what happened after the palm procession, you find that God is sitting with you, that God is at work in ways you hadn’t known or noticed before - both in the story and in your life.  Many of us will find aspects of the passion story we identify with this year. In allowing ourselves to hear the story, to be drawn into it, you prepare yourself to receive the greatest of all God’s gifts - the resurrection on Easter morning.

Much like the disciples as they lived through the events of Holy Week, there is no way for us to know what will happen as we live out the story of Covid-19.  However, we can also learn from their example in letting go of fear, at least for a little while, and expressing our gratitude - giving thanks for the incredible gifts - all of the miracles - that God has brought into our lives.  As we do, may we find that moments of gratitude lead to moments of peace.

Thanks be to God.  Amen.