

**The Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost:
October 13, 2019
The Rev. Scott Walters**

Back in the seminary days, I made a little extra money doing minor carpentry projects. I once moved a bunch of those little pins to adjust the height of bookshelves in a church office. And a visiting lecturer's wife hired me to install picture hooks in their house, as she didn't trust her husband to execute much of anything that involved physical objects out in the three dimensional world. As my expectations regarding the mechanical inclination of seminary academics dropped, my part time job security grew.

I can't remember exactly what task had brought me to the home of the Rev. Russell Ayers one day. Ardelle was doing some administrative work for a mission project of his. Maybe she recommended my expertise when a light switch cover or cabinet knob needed to be installed. What I do remember is Russell turning to me and suddenly tendering this advice: "Lower your expectations, Scott. That's what I wish somebody had told me when I became a priest. Just lower your expectations. It'll make things so much easier down the road."

Russell did not deliver the commencement address that year. I have no memory of anything the retiring professor who spoke at graduation said. Only that he rambled on so long that my own father fell asleep. And Dad was a retired professor himself, so he knows how to brace himself for the thrill of these occasions.

Now fourteen years on, Russell's three word address is the one I've hung on to: Lower your expectations.

Last Sunday's gospel ended with some of the strangest advice Jesus ever gave: "When you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'" Remember that tough little kernel of rabbinical wisdom? I was so confused by it that I emailed Amber as soon as I read it and said, "Never mind the rota. You're preaching on Sunday," and booked myself a flight to San Diego.

The healing of the ten lepers takes a little less work to make sense of. At least at first blush. But there is a slender thread that may connect these two scenes, and it is this: Lower your expectations, or there will be no room in your life for gratitude. Because gratitude lives in the gap created when the way things are exceeds the way we expected them to be, doesn't it? So if you lower your expectations, gratitude might just grow.

For years the story of the lepers' healing didn't mean much to me, because I thought its lesson was obvious. If someone does something nice to you — especially if that someone is God — you should say thank you. It's impolite not to. It's your moral obligation.

But real gratitude isn't about fulfilling an obligation. Even to God. Gratitude lives in the gap that opens when the way things are exceeds the way we expected them to be. And Jesus wants us to live in that gap. He wants us to live in the joyful knowledge that you don't deserve what's most essential to your life. Gratefulness is living in gift. Gratefulness is just what grace looks like the instant we recognize it. Unfortunately there is something in me that doesn't want to owe anybody anything. Not even God. And so I keep filling in the gap where my gratitude is meant to live.

Even saying thank you can be a way of discharging an obligation rather than living in the knowledge of grace. If I think expressing a proper thank you makes us even, I've killed a gift, haven't I? I've erased the wonderful excess in my mind between what I've got and what I deserve. And Jesus thinks this is a tragedy, even if I'm a leper and only want to be welcomed back into the society that fears and excludes me as unclean. The leper who can't believe he could be so lucky as to be healed by this wandering rabbi and welcomed back into the city is the leper who's come most fully alive. I think this is why Jesus holds him up for us to emulate. Not for his good manners. But for his uncontainable joy.

Some of you know that the real reason Ardelle and I boarded that plane last Saturday for San Diego is because our son was in a trauma unit in a hospital in Escondido. He'd been in a pretty bad car accident the day before.

Alden was going to be ok. But he was plenty beat up. And seeing the crumpled up Toyota he was driving was to have the bottom drop out of even the automatic expectation that your child will go on living day after day after day. Gratitude for his life filled the gap right up. But another lesson in gratitude also awaited me in Escondido.

The trauma surgeon rounded on Sunday morning. So I made sure I was in the room to meet him. He was the one functioning as the attending physician, the one we needed to make sense of what the neurosurgeon said about the small bleed on Alden's brain and what the plastic surgeon said about the breathing problems that might result from his broken nose.

Dr. Campbell swept into the room at about 8am in a white coat and blue snakeskin boots. I mention the boots not so you'll prejudice him, but to confess that I may have been doing so myself. Within the first few minutes of our meeting he said he was ready to remove the chest tube that was helping Alden's collapsed lung reinflate and send him home a day early.

This news might sound good to you, but to me it was abrupt and it wasn't at all clear that he'd consulted with the other surgeons. We were weighing options for at least one procedure, and now we seemed to have no time at all to process them. I asked for him to return at the end of his rounds.

When he did, I gave him a piece of my mind. I was angry that he seemed to be uninformed about the plastic surgeon's recommendations and he mumbled something about saving lives and not having much time for such things. It sounded like he thought our son was considering a nose job for aesthetic reasons rather than respiratory ones. He agreed to let the discharge decision wait until Monday, the original goal, and left.

I'd rather not admit the stereotypes about the arrogance of trauma surgeons that stoked my rage, or the fact that this one's expensive boots were used as evidence against him in the little trial that I'd called to order in my mind. But they seemed entirely justified to me, so I kept them alive all day and rehearsed them to anyone who would listen. Maybe you can recognize the particular satisfaction of being clearly in the right and having someone clearly in the wrong nearby to magnify your rightness.

The next morning, I was about to board the elevator when Dr. Campbell stepped out. To my surprise he not only recognized me, he said he'd been bothered by our exchange the day before and that he'd even had trouble sleeping. He said he'd learned in the Navy to lead with a left hook and that the instinct didn't always serve him well.

Besides that, he said a few years back a meaningful relationship with God had opened up a desire to change some old ways of being that tended to do damage to the people around him. He wanted to live a little more out of his experience of grace. Out of the knowledge that his worth wasn't established by how much more he knew than the rest of us or what apparent miracles he could work, but by the fact that he

was loved without qualification by a God who could forgive it all. Forgive not not only his failings, but also the achievements he'd pinned his identity on for so long.

Do you know what it's like to be in the presence of someone who is actively trying to change the way he responds to the world? It is the rarest of things. In a world that seems to run on outrage, I'd so much rather justify my anger — nurse it even — than learn another way to be. Even if that new way of being could set me free.

Strange as it may sound, I think a surgeon in snakeskin boots may have been a grateful leper sent by God to startle me awake to the gift of my life. Because he wasn't satisfied to have his own ego and his own considerable skill fill up the space between the way things were and the way he thought they ought to be any longer. He had tasted the gratitude that comes from believing God's love still embraces untouchables, which we all can be at our worst. And this Christian wasn't willing to settle for anything less than the life of grace anymore. Even if it meant asking forgiveness from a frightened, angry father right in the gleaming hospital where you really do raise the dead and work miraculous Jesus-like cures every day.

I don't know if you noticed, but in the gospel story, all ten lepers were healed. But only one was made well. "Get up and go on your way," Jesus said to the man who returned, "your faith has made you well." Jesus healed them all without condition. Faith was what allowed the gift of healing to come alive in only one of them as gratitude.

I want to be the leper who turned back, don't you? Not because Jesus healed him as a reward for his gratefulness. He'd already been healed for free. But because the deepest human gratitude is what divine grace looks like when our expectations about all we think we deserve open up, and a fresh knowledge of the gift of our belovedness comes rushing in.