

Developing an Attitude of Gratitude
20 Pentecost C
O God so pour out your Spirit upon Us
That our thoughts may be your thoughts
Our words may be your words
And our Works become Greater
Than that of Christ our Lord. Amen!

“Was none of them found to return and give praise to God...?” Luke
17:18

In the story of Jesus encounter with the ten lepers, faith and gratitude are intimately connected. The lepers prayed for God’s mercy. They were commanded to show themselves to priestly authority. As they went they were healed. And one turned back to give thanks. Jesus sums up the Samaritan’s gratitude by saying to him, “Your faith has made you well.”

Giving God praise for your good fortune is one thing. To attribute health to the attitude of gratitude is like saying an autoimmune response depends on you. Attitude affects more than our reaction to our external environment and those who have to live with us. Attitude has been proven to have a measured affect on health. How so?

An article in the Wisconsin State Journal told of a recent study at the Rush University Medical Center in Chicago on the effect of “purpose” on Alzheimer’s disease. The study suggests that elderly people who “see themselves as self-disciplined, organized achievers have a lower risk for developing Alzheimer’s disease than people who are less “conscientious.” A purposeful personality may somehow protect the brain, perhaps by increasing neural connections that can act as a reserve against mental decline,” according to the study co-author, Robert Wilson.* (*Wisconsin State Journal, Oct. 2, 2007, A2 and the Archives of General Psychiatry, Oct. 1, 2007).

A personality trait called “conscientiousness” was tested for in 997 older Catholic priests, nuns and brothers whose average age was 75. At the start of the study none showed signs of dementia. During 12 years of tracking 176 developed Alzheimer’s disease. Of those 997 that started the study those with the highest scores for “conscientiousness” had an 89% lower risk of developing the disease compared to people with the lowest scores for that trait. An

astounding find was that some of the brains of those who died with lesions compatible with Alzheimer's disease had no signs of dementia!

What intrigued me were the statements that were given to these people during testing. The scores for "conscientiousness" were based on agreement with statements such as: "I work hard to accomplish my goals," "I strive for excellence in everything I do," "I keep my belongings clean and neat" and "I'm pretty good about pacing myself so as to get things done on time." Taking into account other risk factors such as smoking and inactivity researchers still found a 54% lower incidence of Alzheimer's disease in those people who were "dutiful," a trait associated with being "conscientious."

What are the implications for this study among Christians? The implications concerning stewardship? The statements that talked of "striving for excellence" and "working hard to accomplish my goals," can also be found in Holy Scripture. Scripture commends the trait of being "conscientious." Without it the Christian could not achieve the traits of "godliness, righteousness, faith, love and endurance." If researchers can apply the effect of such a trait on disease is it appropriate to apply "conscientiousness" to our personal "gratitude" for God's mercy?

We measure that trait of gratitude when we are asked to join a team to develop a strategy for Outreach, Fellowship, Education or Worship. We measure gratitude in the time we spend in private devotions. Though five minutes in prayer may seem like an eternity to spend with God now, think what an eternity will feel like when the videotape plays back our five minutes a day! We measure gratitude when we are each asked to pledge support for the approved budget that your vestry members will pass this Fall. We measure gratitude when we respond to God and serve as a leader of this church on vestry.

Let me tell you how I believe the trait of gratitude will help Trinity. A grateful people are people others want to join. People who go to church are among the most thankful. The attitude of gratitude is contagious! It takes practice through random acts of kindness but it will be a trait of a growing church. Some day when psychiatrists test other traits – like gratitude, Trinity ought to volunteer itself and have its study published in the Gazette and the Wisconsin State Journal. It will be a sign that the people of Trinity Janesville has not forgotten what God has done and wants to do in its midst.

And when the results come out Trinity will be the test case for acts of gratitude for the mercy of God for other churches. People will be flocking to our services and fighting each other to volunteer for vestry. That may be just a dream right now. Yet the Spirit can move mightily as he did during the Cursillo movement when people rediscovered the power of giving thanks to God in their lives.

Are you thinking now, "Wait a minute Father! "Is he dreaming?" or "Has early dementia started to creep into his mind?"

No, I tested high on "conscientiousness." On the scale of "0-4" used in the Alzheimer test subjects I can honestly put a "4" in "striving for excellence" and "working hard to accomplish my goals." We all need to test high in "gratitude" as well if we are to grow in faith, grow in giving and grow in making Christ known in this town.

Only one leper turned back to give Jesus thanks. Doesn't God deserve more? Doesn't God deserve more than a ten percent return on his investment? Amen!