

When I was growing up, we lived in a two-story house, and the entryway of this house was a big, round room, with a grand, sweeping staircase swirling all the way around the wall. 21 stairs to go up or down, and with a big, dark, wooden banister swooping right down with it.

As you might be aware, wood does not typically grow in a swooping, curved shape, and so in order to make this bannister, the builders of the house basically had to bend the wood. It took months. Attaching one long slice to another, fastening them in such a way that, over time, the wood itself would start to take a new shape; it would, in a sense, grow accustomed to the curve, and eventually, it would be able to hold that curved shape on its own, without the help of a clamp or vice--the wood was trained to follow a curve, until finally, it held the curve on its own.

I believe this is what God does with us. God binds us together with people who pull our lives into new curves, new directions, and God uses practices, disciplines, habits, that shape and re-shape our lives...so that our lives bend more and more to follow the curve of following Jesus.

Today we begin our series on stewardship, and I want to begin it by saying this--stewardship is not primarily about raising money for the church. Stewardship is about reshaping our lives. It's about saying that Jesus has a claim on me, and so he has something to say about what I do with my money, and my stuff. People have often said "Well, my giving--what I do with my money--is between me and God," and I do respect the need for privacy in these matters, but I just want to

warn you about that. I just want to say, "Be careful--I mean, have you heard what Jesus has to say about money?" When we hold our pocketbooks and our checkbooks up to Jesus and say, "What shall I do with this, Lord?"...well, let me assure you: Jesus will have a response.

In my few years of ministry, I have begun to learn that there is a vast difference between fundraising, and leading people toward faithful stewardship. Fundraising is about inviting you to join in a specific ministry, a project, fulfilling a need; but stewardship is much deeper--what we are exploring over the next few weeks is about reshaping the way we see money, and the way we use it, based on our love and experience of God.

And so we begin today with gratitude. And we find Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, on the move, as Jesus tends to be. Ten lepers see him coming and they all rush at him at once--they are clamoring for his healing, fearful that there is only so much to go around, or perhaps they have organized themselves and come together to beg for healing for all. Either way, His response is swift--Go, show yourselves to the priest--to the one who will confirm that you are healed, and they go, and sometime--presumably after they have gone some distance--their bodies are transformed, there is a reversal, a restoration of skin, hands, faces.

9 kept going. 1 turned back. He ran back to Jesus, shouting and praising God, then bowing and thanking Jesus.

1 was different. Set apart. Changed. And from Jesus' response, we can see that this was important to Jesus. "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine-- where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except for you?"

Why did Jesus care so much? Is he just trying to get the thanks that is due to him? I wouldn't have pegged Jesus to be the guy who gets hung up about whether or not he gets a thank you note. I wouldn't pick Jesus to be a quid pro quo kind of guy, expecting a proper show of thanks for the gift he has given. No, I think Jesus cares because Jesus is interested in people's lives being shaped and reshaped by the recognition of what God has done, shaped and reshaped by the action of gratitude. Jesus has come to bring the kingdom, to turn this world around and set it on a one-way path toward healing and wholeness, and he wants to be sure we know it when we see it; he cares to see us changed by it, to see glimpses of the kingdom coming in us. Perhaps that is what he saw in the one who turned back and gave thanks.

The song I have sung to each of my three children in their infancy is Come thou fount of every blessing. It's hard to pick my favorite phrase from the song, but certainly one of my favorites is the very first one--Come, thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy praise. Right off the bat, an acknowledgment that God, the one who gives blessing after blessing, God must tune my heart toward gratitude, toward praise. I can go all day long receiving blessings from this fountain, but my heart, my spirit, won't sing praise on its own--like even the finest piano or guitar, it is subject to the weather, to the way things are going in my life,

and its song has to be tweaked, tuned, and retuned from the other songs it tends to sing--songs of my own praise, songs of fear, songs of scarcity--tuned, and retuned to sing God's praise.

Gratitude, praise, thanksgiving--I think it begins with recognition. It begins with knowing the blessing when we see it--it's the moment when the leper looks down at his body and realizes he is clean. It grows out of perception and our ability to know blessing when we see it--to see blessing, and abundance, enough, rather than seeing all that is missing, all that we don't have.

Glennon Melton is a blogger, and a few months ago she posted a picture of herself in her kitchen. The kitchen was irrelevant to the picture--it just happened to be the room where she was standing, but following that post, she immediately received messages from readers wanting to help her update her kitchen. She writes, "Along with their messages came pictures of how my kitchen could look, if I would just put some effort and money into it.

She says, "I've always loved my kitchen, but after seeing those pictures I found myself looking at it through new, critical eyes. Maybe it *was* all wrong. Maybe the 80's counters, laminate cabinets, mismatched appliances and clutter really *were* mistakes I should try to fix. I stood and stared and suddenly my kitchen looked shabby and lazy to me. I wondered if that meant I was shabby and lazy, too. I decided I'd talk to my husband and make some calls about updates."

But then, later that night, she changed her mind. She realized that she had become overrun by the notion that what she had was not enough--she realized that what she needed was not new things, but rather new eyes to see the things she already had. And so instead of starting plans for remodeling, she wrote a new post, and she titled it, "Give me gratitude, or give me debt." Here, she proceeded to post pictures of her kitchen with comments like this:



"You guys. I have a REFRIGERATOR. This thing MAGICALLY MAKES FOOD COLD. Inside my refrigerator is FOOD. Healthy food that so many parents would give anything to be able to feed their children. Almost 16,000 mama's babies die every day from malnutrition. Not mine. When this food runs out, I'll just jump in my car to get more. It's ludicrous, really. It's like my family hits the lottery every morning."



THIS CRAZY THING IS A WATER FAUCET. I pull this lever and CLEAN WATER POURS OUT EVERY TIME, DAY OR NIGHT. 780 million people worldwide (one in nine) lack access to clean water. I'm almost embarrassed to say that we also have one of these in each of our two bathrooms, and one in the front yard with which to WASH OUR FEET. We use clean drinking water to WASH OUR FEET. Holy bounty.



And then this: This is the magical box in which I put uncooked stuff, push some buttons, and then a minute later- pull out cooked stuff. It is like the JETSONS up in here.

Do you see what she did? She shifted her focus--in her words, she put on her "perspectacles." She shifted her focus from what she didn't have to what she had--from noticing what was missing from her kitchen, to noticing the amazing gifts filling her kitchen. She made a switch from one narrative to another--from the narrative that says, "There's something out there that I don't have, and other people seem to think I should have it. What I have must not be enough," to a narrative that says, "Wow! Look at this!" She shifted from a narrative of scarcity...to a narrative of abundance, by one single act: gratitude.

Gratitude is the act of shifting perspective, opening our eyes to the gifts all around us. Gratitude is the antidote to self-indulgence, and unhealthy desire. When we find ourselves with a stranglehold on our resources, on our paychecks, grabbing hold of them and demanding, "Give me everything you've got," gratitude loosens our grip, unclenches our fists, just enough that we can see the gifts God has put in the palms of our hands, so that we can look up, and simply say, "Wow." Glennon unclenched her hands, looked around her kitchen, realized that what she had was more than enough; she realized that the most important thing in her kitchen was the people who come in and out of it, who dance on its floors and feast on the bounty God creates there. "I am free," she said. Freedom. When my hands are open, they are free--freely available for receiving, and for giving, for becoming a part of God's lavish economy of grace.

Grace--a story of abundance--God's story. Grace poured out in abundance, like water, poured over us, washing us clean, making us whole, giving us a new story, a new narrative--from scarcity, to abundance. Water that reminds us of the



beginning, when the spirit hovered over the water; water that points us to the end, to the river of life that will flow through the Holy City. Water that reminds us of the God who holds our beginning and our end, and who frees us to live in the present, freely, joyfully, abundantly, with gratitude in our hearts. We thank you, Lord.

Summary: Practices of gratitude redirect our focus from all that's missing in our lives to the abundance that God has given us. Gratitude opens us to freely receive and share the gifts of our limitless God.