

# “Gratitude and Improv”

*Luke 17: 11-19*

The Rev. Emily Krause Corzine

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From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: [home@first-church.org](mailto:home@first-church.org)

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

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*Prayer for Illumination: Holy God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit. Silence in us any voice by your own. As your word is proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you have for us this day. Amen.*

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In college, a friend who lived across the hall from me was a part of Denison University’s improvisational comedy troupe. Some members of this troupe have gone on to the cast of The Second City in Chicago and Saturday Night Live. I would watch them rehearse. I would watch them perform. I was always amazed with each performance. Before that, I always thought that improv troupes just go out on stage and they make it up. Some people are just naturally good at improvisation. At least that’s what I used to think.

I asked my friend what made this group so funny and their shows seamless. She said, “a lot of practice. And a lot of grace.” This group puts in hours and hours of practice in order to be spontaneous. Improvisation takes practice. Years of practice.

And then there's the story of Chesley Sullenberger, the pilot who landed in the Hudson River when his plane was hit by a flock of geese. Here he is, he's just taken off from the airport with 150 people on board, and both engines go out.

He's never been in the air above New York and had his engines go out. He's in a new situation where he has to fall back on decades of experience and training. He improvises. He looks around, he sees the Hudson River, and he thinks, "I can dip down in there. I might hit something, but it's less of a problem than landing in the middle of Manhattan. I'm going to give it a try."

It's a classic moment of improvisation. He's not being spontaneous, clever or witty; he's bringing into that moment all that he has learned over a long period of time.

I personally never think I excel at improvisation. I like to have a plan. I like to have things written out. I like to know what the next line is going to be. I am a manuscript preacher. Improvisation doesn't come naturally to me.

The truth is that much of life is improvisation. It is a rare day when we are not asked to say or try something that's not on the page, that isn't in the script. Which means that improvisation is a useful skill to have in all sorts of settings because you never know when life is going to throw new things at you.

A few years ago on the Sunday after Easter, the power was out here at First Church. There was no electricity all morning. Talk about improvisation. We made a plan to hold both worship services outside, with a battery-operated sound system and our best voices to project over the sounds of Broad Street. We moved chairs and hymnals outside, welcomed and redirected visitors, and settled in to give Glory to God out in the crisp morning air. It was a darn good day of improvising by the staff, deacons, choir and the congregation, if I do say so myself.

We negotiate the unexpected through improvisation. Driving right now in central Ohio with all of the orange barrels involves a lot of improvisation. In every business, in every field, change is occurring at a faster and faster rate. Which means that improvisation is a useful skill. Let's return to the world of comedy improvisation. The basis of all successful improv is something called "yes and."

You start with "yes." When you are creating something out of nothing, the first rule is to agree. Say yes to what has just been said.

I'm going to use an example provided by Second City alum Tina Fey.<sup>1</sup>

If I start a scene with "I can't believe it's so hot in here," and you say, "No, it's not hot in here," the scene is over. There is

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<sup>1</sup> Tina Fey, Bossypants. My Thanks to Rev. Amy Miracle who gave me the Tina Fey, Improv reference.

no way to continue. Improv is built on “yes.” But it doesn’t end with yes.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> rule of improv is the simple word “and.” Agree and... Agree and add something – build on what has been said. It’s not enough to say yes. You have to add something of your own. You have to contribute.

Again Tina Fey

If I start a scene with “I can’t believe it’s so hot in here,” and you just say, “Yeah...” we’re kind of at a standstill. But if I say, “I can’t believe it’s so hot in here,” and you say, “What did you expect? We’re in hell.” Or if I say, “I can’t believe it’s so hot in here,” and you say, “Yes, this can’t be good for the wax figures.” Or if I say, “I can’t believe it’s so hot in here,” and you say, “I told you we shouldn’t have crawled into this dog’s mouth,” now we’re getting somewhere.

The first rule of improv is to welcome, affirm and value each other’s contribution, no matter how crazy it gets, listening to each other without judgment or trying to figure out what you’re going to say before the other person has the opportunity to speak.

That is incredibly applicable to just about every aspect of life. I wonder how much of life shuts down when we are quick to say “no” rather than “yes,” and how expansive life with God and others can be when we choose to live with a welcoming, affirming, resounding “yes.”

Equally important is the “and.” The “and” is all about contributing to the solution, adding to the work, sharing our gifts and insights to make something even better.

Now let’s think about the text for this morning.

There has never been a good time to be a leper. Life was particularly bleak at the time of Jesus. Lepers lived in isolation. They had to shout, “unclean” when someone approached. They had to be verified by a priest to be healed of their affliction. But Jesus has a thing for healing lepers.

In this story, the ten lepers beg Jesus for mercy, and Jesus responds with a command: “Go and show yourselves to the priest.” All of them go as they have been told, obeying the command. All ten! They show themselves to the priest and are healed. However, only one comes back to Jesus.

Who are we in this text? We must be the one who comes back- I mean, we are here in church today. We could be lots of other places, reading the New York times, or doing its crossword puzzle or going to pick apples or getting an early table for brunch. Thank goodness we are not like the other misguided nine who don’t return thanks.

Maybe you spend every hour of every day being thankful. But, I doubt it.

There are lots of reasons why the other nine didn’t return. In their exuberance of this healing they don’t look back. Maybe one was going to finally reconnect with his family. Another,

tracks down the love of his life. Another, had too many other things on his to do list to put “Write Jesus a Thank You Note.”

Maybe we are more like one of the nine. We don’t always get it right. We aren’t grateful all the time. Let’s face it, we have been recipients of gifts for which we haven’t said “Thank You.” We’ve all given gifts for which we were never thanked.

So why did the one Samaritan leper return? Maybe overwhelmed by a completely unexpected gift he discovers something new. He discovers something more important than obeying the instructions he’s been given. The one leper is able to improvise. He’s aware of the emotion of gratitude welling up inside. So he follows his heart instead of instructions.<sup>2</sup>

I came across an article this week by pastor Paul Duke, in which he suggests that ‘Praise is the “jazz factor” of faith.’ He writes, “the leper’s freedom has found its voice and is having its proper play at Jesus’ feet.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, thankfulness is the improvisation of love.

Jesus gave all ten of them a command to go to the priests and be healed. Jesus gave them the script to follow. He gave them a simple song to sing to the priests, and all ten went on rehearsing. But one of them heard something else in the melody. He heard a different strain than the others. He began

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor.

<sup>3</sup> Paul D. Duke, “Down the road and back.” Christian Century, Sept. 27-Oct.4, 1995, p883.

to improvise on that theme. And back at Jesus' feet, he sang a song of improvisational gratitude.<sup>4</sup>

It's easier to improvise when things are going very well. When you find the perfect parking spot; when your scan comes back clear, when the church budget has a surplus. But when things aren't going very well, it is harder to riff a song of gratitude-- and then, our emotions come to the forefront.

We don't know how grateful the one leper was the day after he returned to Jesus or the day after that. The healing and wholeness he received opened his life up to new possibilities. New opportunities to pursue, new avenues to explore, new stages on which to perform. All we know is that he had more moments in which to practice gratitude.

Here's the thing: gratitude becomes easier to choose as we practice it. Gratitude, like faith, hope, love and commitment are not inborn traits that some have and some don't, but rather gratitude is more like a muscle that can be strengthened over time. And as we practice giving thanks and more frequently share our gratitude, we not only grow in gratitude but create an example for others. We create a climate in which it is easier to be grateful and encourage those around us to see the blessings in all things.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Dunham, Improvisational Gratitude, [www.day1.org](http://www.day1.org), 2007.

<sup>5</sup> David Lose, [www.inthetime.org](http://www.inthetime.org), 2013

Being grateful and saying thank you are absolutely at the heart of God's hope for the human race and God's intent for each of us.

There is evidence that Jesus knew exactly what he was talking about. "Boost Your Health with a Dose of Gratitude" was the title of a Web launch by a medical group. The essay cited thousands of years of philosophical and religious teachings urging gratitude and then cited new evidence that grateful people, for whom gratitude is a permanent trait, have a health edge. It may be that grateful people take better care of themselves, but there is evidence that gratitude alone is a stress reducer, that grateful people are more hopeful, grateful people are fun to be around, they donate more of their money and their time, and that there are links between gratitude and a healthy immune system.

The truth is that every generation of believers face new circumstances that call for improvisation. That's what the disciples came to understand, that sometimes following Jesus meant they had to make it up as they went along. And the leper who returned, saw the abundance of what God can do and chose to respond with a thankful heart.... He also found out he is surprisingly good at improv. At the "yes and."

"Yes and" opens up possibilities. It's a helpful practice in so many parts of life – work, home, relationships, partnerships, and the Christian community. It's deceptively hard to do. It takes discipline. Practice. Commitment.

How is God calling us to live out our “Yes, And...?” In our community of faith, it means living a connected and engaged life on our faith journey. It means valuing and empowering the faith journey of children and youth and people of all ages around us here in this place. **Saying Yes** in our life of faith offers us the opportunity to live out the message of God’s love for all, affirming each person’s worth in this world as we work for justice.

**Saying AND**, means we are willing to make a personal investment here in our life together; contributing what we can in generous ways, sharing our gifts and making something around us better.

There are limits to our ability to improvise – no matter how much we practice, no matter how open we are to saying yes, no matter how willing we are to add our voice and energy to the effort, our own resources of energy and intelligence and imagination only take us so far – we need love, grace, forgiveness, healing – we need God. And that’s OK because God isn’t done with us. God is not done with you. God is not done with me. God isn’t done yet.

Remember, gratitude is an invitation to live our “Yes..And.” It’s an invitation that God never tires of making.

Thanks be to God.

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

### **The Gospel according to Luke, Chapter 17.**

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!' When he saw them, he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, '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 this foreigner?' Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'

**Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.**

**Thanks be to God.**