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Grateful for the Rain
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

Perhaps you have heard of the man who is so grateful for rain that when most of us rush to get out of rain showers or do whatever we can to avoid going out at all, Anthony Ray Hinton says he runs out into it. He wonders how anything that falls from heaven could be seen as anything but precious. And he is grateful to feel each and every drop of rain on his face. Anthony has this perspective because there were 30 years of his life where he could not go out into the rain, or anywhere he wanted to go, because he was incarcerated.

In 1985 Anthony Ray Hinton was arrested for the murder of two men in the state of Alabama. When he protested that he was innocent, that he was nowhere near where the murders took place, he was told he was going to jail anyway because he is black. Not only did he go to jail, he was sentenced to death and went to death row where he spent all but one hour a day in a five foot-by-seven-foot cell in solitary confinement.

During that time, Anthony maintained his innocence and counseled other inmates on death row, as well as some of the prison guards, who advocated for his release. Finally, his case was taken up by the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama and thanks to the help of a team of lawyers, were able to get his case before the Supreme Court where he was declared innocent in 2015. Which meant after 30 years of waiting to die in prison, Anthony was free. He says no one can ever know what that word really means until you have been denied freedom.

But there is more to Anthony Ray Hinton. In an interview with the television show *60 Minutes*, Hinton was asked if after depriving him of 30 years of the prime of his life, his marriage, the opportunity to start a family of his own, and pursuing a career, he was angry with the people who incarcerated him. When the interviewer seemed to have trouble understanding his answer that he had forgiven all the people who sent him to jail, Hinton went on to explain, "I am a joyful person. I gave them 30 years of my life. But I am someone who likes to smile, who likes to share joy with others, and if I was angry and bitter, then they would have taken all of my life, and that would not be right." Anthony Ray Hinton's story is featured in lawyer and activist Bryan Stevenson's book *Just Mercy* and a movie that will be released later this year under the same title. It is a remarkable story about a remarkable person, whose perspective is both humbling and inspiring – a man who is grateful for every drop of rain that falls on his face, and whose gratitude is why he continues to work for justice and God's mercy for all to this day.

Such a valuable perspective may be what the author of Luke's Gospel wanted us to see in our Gospel reading today about ten men who were healed of skin disease. We need to remember leprosy in the Bible was many things. It may or may not have been the disease that eats away at the skin formally diagnosed as leprosy. In Jesus' day any skin ailment like psoriasis or other skin rashes might qualify as leprosy, which was an alienating disease, as religious law required people suffering from it to leave their families and communities for fear it would be contagious. Which is why we see the people with leprosy outside a village in today's Gospel.

But there is another level to leprosy, one that is more metaphorical or symbolic. In the Bible, leprosy often represented the concept of the sinful human condition because people who suffered from it were isolated from others and from their places of worship, meaning they were isolated from God. Now, we understand today this is not the case. God does not abandon people who suffer from disease, but in Biblical storytelling it was a device that represented the way sinful behavior, extreme selfishness that looked to self only and was willing to exclude all others, including God to get what they want was represented by the way leprosy isolated people from each other. So, when we encounter people suffering from leprosy in today's Gospel, the author may have wanted us to see more than people suffering a physical disease. They were suffering from isolation from their families, community, and synagogue. For the people of the time, this isolation would have been worse than any physical discomfort caused by the disease, and this isolation represented sin.

After all, what the men suffering from leprosy asked Jesus for in the Gospel was not money or food or better clothing, they asked for mercy. And it was God's mercy Jesus gave them in the form of healing because only by curing their disease would they be able to rejoin their families, communities, and religious life. Only that mercy could restore them to freedom, and freedom from sin. But like how Anthony Ray Hinton needed a judge to legally declare him innocent, the lepers needed a legal authority to declare them clean before they were truly free, which is why Jesus sent them to the priests, as they were the legal authority needed for that purpose in that day and time.

And of course, we read that all ten men were healed while they were on their way. And nine of the ten kept going. Nine of the ten did not look back. Perhaps they picked up the pace, eager to be free to rejoin their families and community. But one out of the ten had a different perspective. He did look back. And went back. Not quietly or respectfully. I love the part where the author of Luke's Gospel says this one out of ten went back to Jesus loudly praising God. It reminds me of Anthony Ray Hinton seeing rain as precious because it falls from heaven. It reminds me of joy and brings out joy in me and reminds me of resurrection life

Out of ten men, only one had a perspective so different, it made him turn around, shout for joy, and fall at Jesus' feet to thank him. Jesus noticed this too when he asked about the other nine. But he also noticed something else that made the one out of ten different. The one out of the ten was a foreigner, a Samaritan.

This is not the first time in Luke's Gospel that a Samaritan does something unexpectedly faithful or brilliantly lives into the command to love God with our whole self and to love our neighbors as ourselves. The most memorable is the time Jesus made a Samaritan the hero of his parable called the Good Samaritan. The author of Luke's Gospel seems to want us to see things from this outsider's perspective and how it connects to the Kingdom of Heaven.

I won't go into the details about the Jews of Jesus' time and the Samaritans and the ways they despised each other. One commentator wrote they saw each other as enemies, which is probably enough for us this morning to understand their relationship. They worshiped in different places and were decidedly not welcome in each other's temples. Some have interpreted this to mean the one out of the ten could not return with the other nine to their temple to be declared clean, but according to the author of Luke, they were in a region where the one could have returned to his own place of worship and be restored to his community. Perhaps the author of Luke wanted us to see that it was an outsider who recognized something more than healing that happened, and that recognition, that awareness, led to his expression of gratitude and connected him to something deeper and more real than his local community: it connected him to the Kingdom of God made real in Jesus. Which makes this not just about healing, it is about forgiveness of sin and resurrection life.

The key to that awareness is his expression of gratitude, when he thanked Jesus and Jesus told him to get up and go on his way. This was no mere dismissive wave of the hand from Jesus. The word in Greek for get up is very close to the word resurrection, which could mean the part about going on his way was not about simply returning to the life he had before, it is about the freedom of new life in Christ. It is about going back restored and renewed, to live into that resurrection life that is the connection to God's Kingdom not in some future life after death, but in this life here and now.

And that's where you and I are invited into this story, for the Gospel isn't just about stuff that happened in the past, it is about how we too can recognize and participate in God's Kingdom here and now. One way is the practice of gratitude. Which isn't just being polite and saying thank you. Gratitude is a perspective, it is seeing reality, not just the bad or just the good, but all of reality in its complexity and being able to recognize where God is present.

In *The Book of Joy*, author Douglas Abrams writes that science has proven our brains have evolved to focus on the negative; most likely as a survival tactic to help us pay attention to dangers or when resources run low. But this also can lead to a narrow and selfish perspective that misses a great deal of reality and can also lead to hopelessness, depression, greed and destructive behaviors. However the practice of gratitude, science has also shown, cuts through that negativity and allows us to see more of reality and can actually help connect us to each other and to God, to feel empathy, hopefulness, and help each other. In his own words Douglas Abrams says, "Gratitude is the recognition of all that holds us in the web of life and all that has made it possible to have the life that we have and the moment we are experiencing." In other words, gratitude connects us all and shifts our perspective from the narrow-minded focus of lacking, fear, blame and anger to the wider perspective of benefit and abundance. It is how someone like Anthony Ray Hinton can experience freedom without anger and bitterness and can work to bring the kind of mercy he experienced and the mercy the lepers cried out for to more people.

This perspective also reminds us that the Kingdom of God is open to all people, even those we might consider outsiders or enemies. Which is good news for those who might feel like outsiders, because of things like race, or gender or age or financial situation or politics or education level or whether or not we have served time in prison. God's love and God's mercy is for us all, and not only do we need to listen to the perspectives of all people, those of us who feel we are outsiders need to share our perspectives, most especially when we see those Kingdom of God blessings like raindrops from heaven. Such perspectives are what can help us all feel the connection to God's Kingdom through Jesus that is very real and very present, which can be humbling and inspire us to live into the resurrection life Christ calls us to.