

Gratitude: Paying Attention
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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“Gratitude: Paying Attention” Pilgrim Church UCC February 8, 2015—Fifth Sunday after Epiphany (Mark 1:29-39)

I just finished a book by Sonia Nazario—who won the Pulitzer Prize, called *Enrique’s Journey*. It chronicles the true story of a boy traveling from Honduras to the US to reunite with his mother. Many immigrants from Central America are single mothers who leave their children with relatives to work in domestic services or factories. These women send money back for their kids to live better lives. Nazario asks herself: “What would I do if I were in their shoes? Would I come to the United States, where I could earn more money and send cash back to my children? This would mean my sons and daughters could eat more than sugar water for dinner. They could study past third grade, maybe even finish high school, go on to university classes. Or I could stay by my children’s side, relegating another generation to the same misery and poverty I knew so well.”[1] Enrique’s mother, Lourdes, makes the hard decision to leave her children behind. She works in California, North Carolina, and Florida—sending money back to Honduras to support her family.

Enrique misses his mother and falls into depression, anger, and drugs. Eventually, he decides to ride on top of Mexico’s freight trains alongside other Central Americans (what folks call “The Train of Death”) to the US-Mexico border to find her in America no matter what it takes. He wasn’t successful until his eighth trip. Along the way, Enrique is beaten up by gangsters, apprehended by Mexican authorities who throw him in jail and bus him back to Guatemala, and people constantly take by force the few pesos he can beg or earn by performing manual labor. Yet, he also encounters people who are full of compassion—people who run to the train tracks and throw food for those who are riding on top. Priests open their churches for people to eat, rest, receive medical attention, and shower. When Nazario asks Mexicans why they help these strangers from Central America, they say: “When you see these people, it moves you. It moves you. Can you imagine how far they’ve come?” “God says when I saw you naked, I clothed you. When I saw you hungry, I gave you food. That is what God teaches.” “It feels good to give something that they need so badly.” “I figure when I die, I can’t take anything with me. So why not give?”[2]

Stories like *Enrique’s Journey* are helpful to put human faces in front of the statistics and political rhetoric about immigration. Truthfully, the book is a hard read because there’s so much violence that occurs along the way. You can’t help but cling to the light all the more, especially when you hear poor people themselves saying, “I figure when I die, I can’t take anything with me. So why not give?”

Giving and gratitude is all the more powerful when we read stories like *Enrique’s*. Jesus did teach that when we care for people who are hungry, thirsty, and naked—we care for Jesus himself. Jesus cared for people who were sick in body, mind, or spirit all the time. Last week, we heard about Jesus healing a man in the synagogue, facing down that demon by saying be silent and come out of him, silencing those parts of the man that prevented him from remembering that he is named and claimed by God. As we all are. This week, Jesus is at it again as the story picks up right where we left off. Jesus leaves the synagogue and goes to the home of Simon and Andrew alongside James and John and finds Simon’s mother-in-law sick in bed with a fever. Jesus comes in and takes her by the hand, lifting her up. The fever leaves her and she begins to serve them right away.

Sometimes this story can be read as sexist, let's be honest. The guys come home, and poor mom's sick in bed—who's going to make us dinner? Be healed, mom, so that you can get to work taking care of all of us. When my mom was sick growing up, my dad's solution was always, "Okay girls, do you want McDonald's, Arby's, or pizza?" So perhaps I'm bringing my own family baggage to Mark's Gospel. But in an ideal, enlightened version of our story, Simon's mother-in-law would get healed of her fever and then be able to drink some tea and talk to Jesus while Simon, Andrew, James, and John get some dinner going. They're grown men, they're not helpless!

Though we can interpret this story as sexist, we're missing something important if we don't go further than that. No one commands Simon's mother-in-law to get up and start cookin', sister. She responds to Jesus' healing of her own initiative by serving others. She has a whole lot of agency here. Yes, of course she's a woman living in a patriarchal culture and she's conforming to stereotypical gender roles by serving a bunch of men. But Jesus heals her in her own home, so this woman shows him the hospitality that he has just shown her. There's some mutual ministry going on here, and that's remarkable!

Remember, Jesus constantly redefined who a family truly is—she's showing how much Jesus' idea of family will expand in time because she's being like a mother to all who have gathered in her home. Christian communities began in house churches, in small gathered communities of the faithful who cared for each other. In the Gospel of Mark, this mother is Jesus' first servant who responds to him by serving others, including Jesus himself. Some people have even called her the first deacon because through her willing service and action and hospitality—she's helping Jesus to announce that the realm of God is here and that serving others is what Jesus' teachings are all about. Even though it would have been nice for her to get healed, put her feet up, and quietly drink some tea with Jesus—she has other ideas for how she'd like to show her gratitude.[3]

Gratitude is such an important aspect of our spirituality, but it doesn't always come easily. M. Craig Barnes who's now the President of Princeton Theological Seminary writes about gratitude by saying that we have the capacity to choose to receive the life we've been given or to rebel and make a living all on our own. That an element of the Christian story that goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden is that we can't have everything that we want—there are limits. Even Jesus had to work within boundaries, entrusting his disciples with carrying his message out into the world. Jesus had to meet people where they were, help them discover their gifts and who God created them to be, and then send them out to go and do likewise if his message wasn't going to die with him.

Barnes reminds us that we are called to obey and be humble and receive life from God with grateful hearts, even if and when something's missing in our lives. Gratitude becomes a choice, the way that we orient our lives even when so many things may be going wrong and we just can't see what we should be thanking God for anyway! In a culture where we are told to achieve at all costs, being willing to receive God's love even when we may not feel or behave particularly lovely or loveable, that's not simple. Barnes writes, "I'm not certain that there are such things as measures of our spirituality, but if there are, then gratitude is probably the best one. It indicates that we are paying attention." [4]

Now it's obviously been a wonderful week for all Patriots fans after that amazing Super Bowl win. Hopefully you heard the story about Tom Brady and Malcolm Butler. Malcolm Butler is an undrafted rookie cornerback, out of Division II University of West Alabama, and had the most brilliant interception on probably one of the worst called plays ever that sealed the deal for the Pats to win. Tom Brady was named MVP of the Super Bowl and gifted a 2015 Chevrolet Colorado pickup truck. Brady is reportedly finding a way to give that truck to Malcolm Butler whose brilliant move truly did make all the difference in the final seconds of that game. It's an

example from the sports world of responding to a gift—an MVP award and an interception that saved your team—with an act of gratitude. Here's my new truck, and now it's yours. Let's face it, Malcolm Butler makes so much less money than Tom Brady though they all make far more than they should. Yet it's hopeful in realizing that so many people look up to an athlete like Tom Brady, and he's responding with gratitude for the hard work of a relatively unknown teammate. He's responding not because someone forced him to, but because he wants to give that gift.

When we receive gifts and respond with gratitude in some manner, our world becomes just a little more hopeful and bright. Gratitude shows that we're paying attention to God's gifts all around us. Sometimes we're in the position of the MVP, and other times we're the unknown cornerback who made the play to win the game. Sometimes we're in the position of that woman sick in bed with a fever, other times we're doing our best to nurse that woman back to health as Jesus did. If we're honest with ourselves, we're often in the MVP position on a societal level, and therefore it becomes that much more important to give. As Jesus said in the Gospel of Luke: "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required." [5]

Ending at the beginning, with those immigrants riding on the tops of freight trains through Mexico to get to the US to reunite with their family members and encountering perils and people who mean them harm along the way. It's striking that those who throw food and offer strangers in a strange land shelter and showers and medical care are often people full of gratitude. Soledad Vasquez is seventy years old and runs down to the train tracks to toss some food for those riding the Train of Death, saying, "If I have one tortilla, I give half away." Others says, "I know God will bring me more" and "I don't like to feel that I have eaten and they haven't." [6]

The depths of spirituality, of gratitude, of paying attention are astonishing in our world if we have eyes to see and ears to hear these inspiring stories. When we live our lives with grateful hearts, paying attention to the very gift of life from God—even when we don't have everything that we want—we respond by going out to serve as Jesus always intended for us. Gratitude is probably the best measure of our spirituality because it means that we're paying attention. How can we show our gratitude this week? May it be so with us. Amen.

[1] Sonia Nazario, *Enrique's Journey*, xii.

[2] Sonia Nazario, *Enrique's Journey*, 106.

[3] Ofelia Ortega, *Theological Perspective of Mark 1:29-39, Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 1*, 334.

[4] M. Craig Barnes, *The Pastor as Minor Poet: Texts and Subtexts in the Ministerial Life*, 96.

[5] Luke 12:48.

[6] Nazario, *Enrique's Journey*, 105.