

## **2023 10 08 – *Humble Gratitude***

**Scripture: Deuteronomy 8:7-18**

**Luke 17:11-19** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

As most of you know, my mother died last Sunday and this past week has been filled with preparations for her memorial service next Saturday. Part of that preparation is the writing of her eulogy and so my seven siblings, and I, have been gathering stories of her life. It is in the telling of these stories that we express our love and our deep gratitude for all that our mother offered in our lives.

Today we have already heard two stories, one from the Hebrew Scriptures, a story of the Israelites just before they arrived in the Promised Land and the story of Jesus healing ten men. In both stories we were reminded of the importance of giving thanks. We were reminded of the importance of humble gratitude.

So for my reflection today I am going to offer one more story. This is one that I found on the Internet. It was written in April of 2020, just as the pandemic was beginning—certainly a time when gratitude was in short supply. The author is a man from San Diego, California named Richard Schulte. The story is called, *The Pier*. I invite you to relax and allow yourselves to enter the story as it is being told.

A short wooden pier extends from a secluded beach on the northern coast. The pier doesn't appear to serve any purpose. It's too high for a boat, and it doesn't even reach the surf. Fishermen seldom use it.

Sometimes during my long morning commute I'll pull off the coast highway, turn down a dirt road and into the little parking lot by the pier, just to open my window. The sound of the ocean is very soothing.

When I have several minutes to spare, I'll walk out over the water. I'll lean on the rail at the end of the pier, nobody around.

All along that part of the coast, unbroken forest sweeps down from a line of hills to the ocean, and at the end of the little pier a fresh green scent merges with the salt smell. Seabirds fly overhead. The faint chatter of water on small round stones rises from the beach below. Standing there, I like to gaze down at the water as it steadily rolls in and out, then raise my eyes to the horizon, the ocean breeze on my face.

One morning as I stood at the end of the pier, I became aware that a person was walking toward me. A man my own age, dressed in a business suit like myself, was advancing down the pier very slowly. He moved with the aid of two crutches. It appeared to me that he had cerebral palsy. Embarrassed, I looked away.

The man faltered and struggled along the pier and finally came to a halt several feet from me. He leaned his crutches against the wooden rail and stood quietly gazing out over the ocean.

I finally turned to him meaning to say hello. But the man's motionless eyes were so far away. They were riveted to the ocean's horizon beyond the line of breaking surf. His face bore a complicated expression that I couldn't quite untangle. I saw regret. I believe I saw resignation. I looked again at his crutches and kept my mouth shut.

The man stood for a while with fixed, unreadable eyes, then he reached a hand into his pocket and pulled out something small. A coin.

He turned the coin over and over in his fingers without looking down at it. The coin flashed in his hand like an ember from a hidden fire. Suddenly with an easy motion he tossed the coin from the pier. It dropped shining into the ocean and was gone.

The dropping of the coin seemed like a surrender. I yearned to say something sympathetic. I finally spoke. "It's like a gigantic wishing well." He turned and regarded me. "You're wrong," he said. "It's a payment of my debt."

With a sudden smile, he gathered up his crutches, placed one under each arm, and with a lurching effort began to walk away. He lifted his legs one after the other as he struggled back down the short wooden pier. I watched him become smaller.

His debt? I stood perplexed. What could a man in pain possibly owe the ocean?

I turned to gaze again at the breaking surf from the short pier's end. Beyond the line of surf the ocean pulsed to the horizon like an ethereal thing. So unfathomable. And I so small.

My thoughts turned to the ocean's salty smell and how it permeated my life. How I longed to smell it, along with the green. How it made me feel alive.

I thought of the vast world that encircled me. Of the living forest rising up hills from the stony beach, of moving clouds and wheeling seabirds, and silver water rolling back and forth across rippled sand.

I thought of my daily drive up and down the beautiful coast highway, when I considered my life's lofty goals, and listened to my favorite music.

Then I thought of my home halfway up a green mountain, with its porch swing and warm fireplace, its modest yard and few flowers.

I thought of my family. That very morning they had given me a thousand reasons to smile.

I thought of my friends who provided encouragement and bursts of laughter and a feeling that somehow, in this crazy mixed-up world, I belong.

I thought of sunshine and rain, good times and bad, the mixture of pleasure and pain that constituted my own life.

As I gazed out at the surf crashing beyond the pier's end, I realized that all things obtain their life from a churning ocean—a generous ocean whose depths lie beyond any man's reach.

I took a coin from my own pocket. Thoughtfully I turned it over in my hand. I tossed it into the water.

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Let us pray.

May we all recognize the gifts that we have been given and remember to toss a coin, to give thanks, to the Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being, to creation itself and all the people in our lives to whom we owe a debt of humble gratitude. May it be so. Amen.