Many years ago, when I was a seminarian, I served as a chaplain for the summer at Sutter Hospital, just up the street from here.

I was assigned to the Intensive Care Unit, the floor where people go when they are very, very sick.

In all honesty, I had no idea what I was doing. My first day I asked my supervisor what should I bring into the hospital room? A Bible? Prayer book? Notebook?

“No,” she said. “Just yourself.”

It took me awhile to understand that my being in the hospital room was all I was being asked to do, and somehow God would do the rest.

One day I met a young woman who was in the final stages of liver failure. Her name was Cathy, and she was addicted to opioid prescription drugs. Life was not turning out the way she had hoped.

She was not easy to look at. I will spare you the details.

Yet there was something about Cathy that touched my heart, something I cannot explain to this day.

She had an honesty about her, and even a joy about her.

I learned from her something really important: Every day she thanked me for walking into her room, and every day she gave thanks for the small moments that made each day an extraordinary gift.

She taught me how to give thanks.

We, talked, we laughed, we cried. We visited every day as her body gave up on her. Cathy died peacefully in her sleep one night.

Addiction is a disease (we think we know that), and Cathy could never get cured of it. But she was not always treated as someone with a disease – she was treated as a drug addict, as someone living beyond the pale of acceptable society – and outcast.

I tell you about Cathy today because I want you to hear the gospel lesson from Luke about lepers the way the first followers of Jesus would have heard it.

Addicts are the lepers of our day – the outcasts scorned by a society who thinks of them as deserving of their fate.

When you hear this gospel story of Jesus curing lepers, think of drug addicts. And think of how shocked people must have been in the time of Jesus when they heard about Jesus doing this.
Lepers have skin diseases. They are not easy to look at. They are outcasts. Let’s be clear about something: The world creates outcasts, not God. Politics creates outcasts, not God. Prejudice and ignorance create outcasts, not God. Sadly, religion creates outcasts, not God. In the time of Jesus, lepers were required to live outside the city gates. They looked awful, and they lived in the trash dumps. Lepers were supposed to shout warnings to healthy people to stay away – and you can hear them doing this in the gospel story today.

But this group of lepers breaks all the rules. They cry out to Jesus, pleading for mercy.

As if that wasn’t shocking enough, one of lepers is a Samaritan. In the cast system of the ancient Jewish world, Samaritans are the lowest of the low, the untouchables with the wrong religion. No one could be lower than a Samaritan leper.

So here we have someone who is an outcast among the outcasts – who is healed by Jesus – and then he returns to thank Jesus.

Everyone else disappears, but it is the lowest of the low who comes back to give thanks. It is an outcast who outwardly has nothing to be thankful for, who has been scorned his entire life – it is this untouchable Samaritan leper who gives thanks, and no one else.

And Jesus tells him something extraordinary: “your faith has made you well.”

Notice something important here: The connection of gratefulness and faithfulness. Jesus tells the Samaritan that it is his offering of thanks that has made him well and set him free.

Jesus has just re-defined where faith begins. Faith doe not begin with adherence to a set of precepts or dogmas, or a mental exercise of intellectual understanding, or a set of rewards that are earned by following rules. Rather, faith begins with gratitude. Simple gratitude. All else will follow.

Like Cathy, who taught me about giving thanks, this outcast long ago has something to teach all of us about living a life of thanks especially when the world is spinning out of control, the unexpected happens, when people get sick.

In the way thanks, there are no outcasts, no lepers, and no one is excluded. This way of thanks, in fact, the way of Jesus.

And this is what sets us apart as Trinity Cathedral from the rest of the world. We are built on a foundation of thanks, and so much else follows.

This is a place where we can safely worship God, explore the deepest mysteries of life and faith without judgment, form lasting friendships and relationships, and give of ourselves that will make a difference in the world.
We don’t always get it right. We make mistakes, we sometimes hurt people without realizing it. Yet we ask forgiveness, pick ourselves up and try again. We do so with thanks.

Some of you have been here long enough to remember a beloved member of this congregation by the name of Jean Hart.

She sang in the choir, and she hardly ever missed a Sunday until she died many years ago.

Every Sunday, during the Prayers of the People, Jean would say “Thank you Lord for this place.” Many of us waited to hear Jean before adding our own thanksgivings.

Jean lived a life of joyful thanks in everything she did. She showed it with her smile, her words, and in serving others.

Jean Hart still has much to teach us about living a life of thanks.

What if our giving and our thanks came not out of obligation or guilt, but out of joy and delight?

I am especially reminded of Jean Hart at this time of year when we show our thanks for this place by supporting Trinity Cathedral through our gifts of time, talent and treasure.

Today I am asking that we prayerfully consider our financial pledges for the coming year as an offering of thanks for this place.

Please consider how Trinity Cathedral can thrive as we share the abundance that God has given us.

You will notice in front of you colorful brochures with Bishop Megan on the cover. Inside you will find information about how we spend our money, and a pledge card.

Please take one home and consider what you can pledge for the coming year. Then please bring these cards back Nov. 3 when Bishop Megan will be here and will bless our pledges.

But I am asking for even more than that.

I am asking us to lead a life of gratitude not just with our money, but in all that we do with our time and talent God has given each of us.

Consider how our generosity one step at time, one act of kindness at a time – can bring peace, joy and healing into this very hurting and troubled world.

All of our gifts add up. Each of us matters. What we do with this one precious, amazing life matters.

It all begins with us giving thanks. Amen.