

Thanksgiving

Deuteronomy 8:11-18 ¹¹ Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. ¹² When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, ¹³ and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, ¹⁴ then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, ¹⁵ who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, ¹⁶ and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. ¹⁷ Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth." ¹⁸ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.

Luke 17:11-19 ¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³ they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" ¹⁴ When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵ Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶ He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?" ¹⁸ Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹ Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

Thanksgiving

The Old Testament Lesson today is from the book of Deuteronomy. Here's the historical setting. The Hebrew people had been slaves in Egypt. God sent a very reluctant Moses to lead the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt and to a new homeland in Canaan, which is present day Israel and Palestine. Not long after being rescued from bondage, the Hebrews began to complain about the hardships of the desert. They were frantic about food and water and they wanted to return to slavery where food was furnished. When Moses was gone for several weeks up on Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, the people decided that God had left them and built a golden calf to worship. When they approached the land of Canaan, they were afraid to enter it, because they didn't trust God to live up to the promises given to them. Despite their rescue from slavery, despite manna and quail provided for food, and water provided by God, the Hebrews kept losing their trust in God. They were frequently unfaithful.

The book of Deuteronomy is Moses' farewell speech to the Hebrews. Given how fickle their faith had been in the wilderness, Moses knows that it's likely to get even more fickle. Life is going to get easier and better in the new homeland. They'll build homes, graze their herds, raise crops, and expand their families. Instead of wandering through lands, they'll own land. Instead of snakes, scorpions, and blazing sun, there'll be herds grazing on their land and olive trees for shade. And as life gets easier, they're likely to say to themselves, "Wow! Look at what I've accomplished." They'll give less and less credit to God, and more and more to themselves, forgetting God's love and gifts.

It isn't unusual for those who focus on building wealth to overlook their own poverty of spirit and to feel no need for God. The addiction to worldly goods creates selfishness. The self-made person feels that their wealth is entirely their own doing. They don't see that they stand on the shoulders of others, nor the cost to others of their rise to wealth. And with blindness to the web of life that ties us all together, they easily feel superior to those who have less. They depend on money rather than God for their sense of security. It seems like the very gifts of God can easily lead to forgetting God. It's no wonder that Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor." (Luke 6:20)

Our Gospel Lesson is the story of the healing of ten lepers. I've mentioned before that in the Bible, leprosy is a term for serious skin disease. Indeed, Hansen's disease, which we call leprosy, may not have even been known in that part of the world in those days. Hansen's disease wasn't curable until modern antibiotics were developed. But Jewish law had provisions for recognizing and certifying people as cured. The entire second chapter of Leviticus is devoted to describing this process. Obviously, there would be no need for a process to declare that someone had recovered from their ailment, unless there were indeed occasions when people recovered! Until their skin condition cleared up, lepers were quarantined by banishing them from their home and village. They were outcasts who couldn't have contact with anybody. They had to wear torn clothing, have unkempt hair, and cry "unclean" if anyone came close to them. If and when a person recovered from their skin ailment, the local priest had the responsibility to declare when they were healed and could return to their family and community.

In today's gospel passage, ten lepers spot Jesus. They keep their distance as required, but call out for mercy. Jesus doesn't declare that they are healed. Rather, he tells them to go show themselves to the priest, and indeed, on the way to the priest, their skin condition clears up. Only one of the ten turns around and comes back to thank Jesus. For these ten people, living as an outcast was probably a greater burden than their skin condition. Perhaps the other nine overlooked thanking Jesus in their joyful anticipation of rejoining their family. That might be understandable, but still not the correct priority. Jesus expects his followers to place their loyalty to him above that to their family. (Luke 14:25-33) Most of us don't have to choose between our faith and our family. On the other hand, more often than not, we probably devote a lot of time, attention, and resources of every sort to our family – and much less to our faith. We forget that our children, our spouses, our family and friends are taught by the very example of our devotion to discipleship. It's an important part of raising our children, strengthening our marriage, and witnessing in the most meaningful way to those all around us. For these lepers, "I'm home!" is a wonderful message. But there's an even more important message in, "I would have been here sooner, but I just had to go thank the wonderful man who healed me and made my homecoming possible!"

One person did return to offer thanks. Here is the twist that makes so many stories of Jesus and about Jesus stick in our memory. The man was a Samaritan. Jesus showed the same compassion for an outsider, someone whose religious faith was a corruption of the pure faith of the Jews, someone who, because of the history of his clan, was already an outcast before he had leprosy. The difference between Jews and Samaritans was even greater than say, the gulf between a post-Civil War Episcopal plantation owner - and a primitive Baptist son of a slave. Jesus healed all ten lepers, not just the ones with the "correct" religion and the "good" family. The Samaritan is an outsider in the eyes of many, but not an outsider in the eyes of God.

Think about the parable of the man beaten and robbed on the road to Jericho who was rescued by a Samaritan. Here too, it is a Samaritan who is the person living out their life as one who knows how to reside in God's kingdom.

In the story of the prodigal son, the son comes to his senses and returns home to the father he treated so terribly. The father exclaims with unbounded joy, "My son who was dead is now alive again!" The father describes the situation as a resurrection. The son had rejected his father and his family completely. He was dead to the family. But he returned and was once again a living part of the family. In a similar fashion, Jesus told the healed Samaritan who lay at his feet thanking him, "Get up and go on your way." Get up. The Greek word here is the same word that was used to refer to Jesus' resurrection. This Samaritan was once dead to his family and community. Now he is alive to them again. Get up. You are resurrected! Your trust, your lived out faith, has made you well. And, the word well here is *sozo* which can mean thrive, rescue from danger, have well-being, saved, free from disease. Jesus said, "Be resurrected to have a full life again. Your trust has saved you from disease and returned you to well-being." The Samaritan had a new lease on life. He was returned to a life of *sozo*, of wholeness, and he was thankful.

Like that Samaritan, we need to have our priorities in order and be thankful to God. But like the ancient Hebrews, we can forget how blessed we are. We take credit for all that is good and comfortable about our lives. Like those ancient Hebrews, we're inclined to forget how life was harder in the past.

They forgot the burden of slavery. We forget how our forbearers suffered as immigrants, struggled through the Great Depression, and had to endure so much during the Civil Rights movement. Our amnesia robs us of the ability to clearly see our blessings in our lives. We take for granted everything from frozen food to pain relievers, from healthy infants to retirement, from the flower growing at our feet to the sunset on the horizon.

I'd like to ask everyone to try something with me right now. Take a deep breath and see how long you can hold it. Did you notice how good it felt to take your next breath? Do you see how we even take each breath for granted? In the letter to the Ephesians, we're urged to give "thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything." (Eph 5:20 NRS) We're told to give thanks at all times, but that only becomes possible if we begin by making ourselves really aware of how blessed we are. There's a long standing spiritual discipline of listing all one's blessings, naming them before God, and giving thanks. We have a holiday coming up on Thursday that was established as a day of thanks. We've filled it with parades, feasts, naps, football games, and now, the start of the shopping season. I suggest that we forego one of those activities and actually give thoughtful thanks.

Sit down with paper and pen. Begin listing your blessings. List your personal blessings of life, health, longevity, talents, intelligence, education, and wisdom. List your blessings of family, those who raised you, those who put up with you and loved you, those you raised. List friends who love you, share good and bad times with you, encourage you and depend on you. List teachers who guided you, people who inspired you, those who molded you. You may need to get up and get more paper. List blessings that surround you, the air that you breathe, the water in the faucet nearby – clean water, at that! - the breeze on your face, the songs of birds, the scent and color of flowers, the majesty of mountains and rhythm of waves. Don't overlook things like walks in the neighborhood, the smile of friends, the purring of a cat, the unconditional loyalty of a dog. Add things that nourish you like music, paintings, dancing, laughing, the smell of baking cookies, the fresh clean taste of peppermint, the feel of your favorite sweat shirt. God gave us brains and some good things have resulted. Don't forget things like soap, toothpaste, aspirin, x-rays, antibiotics, eyeglasses, and electricity. List the comforts of home, the joys of neighbors and community, the expanding understanding of others made possible by communication via radio, TV, and the internet, which also reveal the wonders of the planet and the similarity of all peoples. There's more. Only you can see all of your blessings. Take time with this. Don't use wide generalities. Be specific. Then look over your list. See God's hand in your life. Try to get your mind around all the ways you've been blessed. Then, offer a prayer of gratitude and love to the One who is the giver of life and author of all good things. Amen.

“Who we are is God’s gift to us . . .
what we do with our life becomes our gift to God.”¹

Luke 6:20 NRS Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

^{NRS} **Leviticus 13:45-46** The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean."⁴⁶ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

¹Peter W. Marty, *The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospels* (Grand rapids, Eerdmans Publishing, 2001) p 428