



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Watertown, WI

“Thanksgiving: A Way of Life”

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Luke 17:11-19

*11 On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. 12 And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance 13 and lifted up their voices, 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 cleansed. 15 Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; 16 and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. 17 Then Jesus answered, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? 18 Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" 19 And he said to him, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well."
Luke 17:11-19*

Thanksgiving, 2012

Collect of the Day

Lord Jesus Christ, so govern our hearts and minds by Your Holy Spirit that, ever mindful of Your glorious return, we may persevere in both faith and holiness of living; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

Where there are holidays there are traditions, some of which we follow not because we know why, but because we feel it's our duty. Growing up, on Good Friday our family always had noodles and prunes for lunch. Stewed prunes over egg noodles, with some sautéed croutons on top. It came from my mom's side of the family so every year we asked her why we had to eat noodles and prunes and she said, "Because my mom made us eat noodles and prunes on Good Friday" . . . as did her mom before her and all the way back to the old country. (If you happen to know why I had to eat noodles and prunes on Good Friday, I'd appreciate you telling me after the service.)

There's another culinary tradition that mom pulls out this time of the year. My mom's a fine cook, so I'm not sure what happened with this one, but it's a kind of jello. Here's the recipe: You heat a can of tomato soup with a can of V8, whisking in some cream cheese. Add a cup of mayonnaise, some salt, Tabasco sauce, and red pepper to taste (which I've never understood because there's nothing red pepper can do to help that.) Now, add chopped green peppers, chopped celery, chopped green onions, chopped avocado, chopped yellow onion and, if you're not feeling festive yet, you can add chopped shrimp. Finally add the gelatin. Then chill it. (I suspect she puts a little syrup of ipecac in it as well, but that's not on the recipe.)

None of us likes it much; somehow it's become a tradition. Even my dad, who never criticized mom's cooking, had a name for this one. He called it plasma. "You boys will not be insulting the plasma this year."

Why am I telling you this? First, I'm daring you to make it and set it before your family and see what they say. Second, the source of that recipe, my mother, was the one

who drilled into us the habit gratitude even when we were not feeling grateful. She knew children are not automatically born knowing how to say thank you. In fact, part of our fallen nature is we don't want to have to say thank you to anyone, not even to God. So mom wasn't going to leave it to chance. It became a source of tension in our home. "Did you call grandma and thank her for the Birthday card?" (She always sent two or three crisp new dollars.) And if I hadn't, the reminders would keep coming until the deed was done.

Maybe it's because of her, but I've come to love Thanksgiving, and have decided it's my favorite of the holidays. Our consumer culture is trying to ruin it by starting Black Friday already Thursday night. I urge you not to encourage those stores with your business. There will be time enough. Just disengage from all that and have a nice meal, maybe with family and friends, and remember some simple but important truths: the goodness of the earth, how fertile and beautiful it is. . . the delight of good food, the gift of family and friends, and above all, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I love Thanksgiving because giving thanks to and praising God are at the very heart of biblical religion. It's the first response to God. Israel's hymn book, the book of Psalms, is full of exuberant praise and thanksgiving for our creator and protector. Psalm 147: "Praise the Lord! How good it is to sing praises to our God, for he is gracious and a song of praise is fitting . . . Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving." Some of those psalms are so over the top with praise that they almost sound like a love letter from someone newly smitten.

The Bible teaches the world around us was created by God and is essentially good. The sun, moon and stars, the wetlands and woods, the fields that produce year after year after year, the flowers and snow crystals and great-horned owls and mountain goats climbing impossible ledges . . . all of it points to God's wisdom and goodness. When you look at his creation, you can see his fingerprints. In fact, sometimes faith begins that way, with an awareness of God's

good and beautiful creation and our place in it. And the human response to all of that is a combination of awe and gratitude.

I have three bee hives, one of which has been struggling. Earlier this summer I discovered that hive had been taken over by hornets . . . bald faced hornets. They are big and nasty and quick to pull the trigger, but unlike honey bees, hornets can sting again and again and again. Not wanting to mix it up with hornets without a plan, I went home and started looking into honey bees and hornets, and I bumped into a remarkable little film by the National Geographic on how Japanese honey bees deal with a hornet in the hive. At first the honeybees do nothing. They just dance a little bit, and with this dance they signal one another that there's an intruder. But still, they don't confront the hornet just yet, not until the news has spread. Then, suddenly, and as if of one mind, they swarm. Hundreds engulf the hornet but they don't sting the intruder. Instead, they start vibrating their wings, creating heat, raising the temperature around the hornet. A honeybee can tolerate 118 degrees Fahrenheit. A hornet can only handle 115 degrees. So the honeybees bring the temperature up to 117 and slowly roast the hornet within the hive. Who taught them how to do that?

Religious people, with our view of creation verses evolution, are often charged with being intellectually lazy. But maybe it's the one who believes all this is just a happy accident . . . maybe it's that one who is intellectually lazy. Again, the first response of faith in God is often that combination of awe and gratitude.

Think of it this way: There's one word that makes the Christian faith different from all the other religions, and that word is grace. We see grace in the Old Testament with God choosing the Israelites as his people. Clearly he thought of it as a marriage and stayed with them and forgave them, though they were an unfaithful and adulterous people. That's grace.

We see even a clearer picture of that grace in Jesus

Christ, loving the unlovable, befriending sinners, then dying on the cross for sinners and for the salvation of sinners.

If grace is the distinctive word that describes God's attitude toward us, then the distinctive word to describe our response is gratitude. Gratitude motivates our entire response. It motivates our good works. It motivates our offerings. It motivates our praise.

Therefore, gratitude is not just an obligation. It is a delight, a pleasure. When we find a way to give God thanks and praise, we find our deepest joy. It's satisfying.

C.S. Lewis famously observed that the healthiest people he knew were the grateful ones, the ones always thanking. "Praise," he said, "is inner health made audible." The opposite is also true. The unhealthiest people are the ones who don't know how to give thanks, but instead are constantly griping. That too is inner health (or the lack thereof) made audible.

There is a New Testament story about gratitude and health and wholeness. We read it every year on this day. It's the story of Jesus and the ten lepers. Leprosy was the scourge of life in first-century Palestine. There was no cure and it was thought to be highly contagious. So the person with leprosy had to be totally separated from the community, even from spouse and children. People with leprosy, then, lived on the margins, on the margins of cities and on the margins of despair and of life and death. They usually formed small colonies of suffering and counted on their families to bring them food, or begged for it from a distance.

One day ten men with leprosy call out to him, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" "Go, show yourselves to the priest," he tells them, and on the way their leprosy miraculously disappears, so that the priest, when he sees them, declares them clean, fit, and safe for life in the community once again. Jesus has given them their lives back, but only one of them returns to thank and praise Jesus. "Where are the other nine?" Jesus asks, loud enough for the crowd to hear. Maybe the other nine intended to come back and thank him. Maybe they planned on it a little later. But

the opportunity is now lost. Then, speaking to the man who did return, Jesus says, “Get up and go your way. Your faith has made you well.” The nine are healed. This man, who expressed his gratitude is more than healed. His gratitude has made him whole.

In his death and resurrection, Jesus has given us our lives back. Therefore, our gratitude to him is going to be more than just a one-time “thank you.” It’s going to be a way of life. And I’m convinced when you cultivate and practice the habit of gratitude, the experience of gratitude deepens over the years. You see things that you wouldn’t otherwise see. Walking out to get the newspaper before the sun has risen, and all those stars above, together with the soft light of the moon causing the frost to glitter in the darkness . . . “Thank you, Lord.” Or kids, waking up in the morning, and realizing you have a four day weekend. . . “Thank you, Lord.” Or working outside in the cold and coming inside to a warm and satisfying stew . . . “Thank you, Lord.” Or crawling into bed and listening to the sound of freezing rain on the windows, and the snoring of your dog, and maybe your spouse too, and cuddling up close . . . “Thank you, Lord.”

The years do teach us gratitude . . . or at least they should. If they don’t we are without excuse and the poorest of men and women.

How about when things are not well with you, can you thank and praise God even then? When you’ve lost your job or lost your health or lost your loved one . . . when a long-held hope is shattered, a dream has died . . . can you give thanks then?

First this: we should not insist on it from those who are not well. We shouldn’t expect a hymn of praise from one whose heart or body is breaking. But I do believe gratitude runs deeper than difficulty or tragedy. Even in the valley of the shadow of death, gratitude is drawn out of us. In fact, a hymn of praise, (like the doxology), is the only hymn that is suitable for every occasion – birth, baptism, wedding . . . even a funeral. So yes, gratitude is still possible when things are not going well. Even then, there is much for which to give thanks. Thank you Lord for him, his skill and care as a doctor. Thank you Lord for her, her compassion; she always seems to know what to say. Thank you, Lord, for friends who care. Thank you for this food, eating it is a small but good thing right now. And thank you Lord for your love in Jesus Christ that is with us even in our darkest valley, for

your love that gives us hope; for your love that will give us our lives back again. Thank you Lord.

Do you remember how it was for the ones who started the tradition? One hundred and two of them started out from Plymouth Harbor on September 6, 1620. Sixty-five days later they sighted land. During the ensuing winter, half of them died. Every family lost someone: husbands lost wives; children lost parents. The next spring, thanks to friendly natives, crops were planted and somehow grew, and so at the very edge of that disaster, with every heart broken, what do they do? They set aside a day for thanksgiving.

Then there was Abraham Lincoln, in 1863, in the middle of the civil war, with more casualties than all our other wars combined . . . in the middle of all that, he proclaims a national day of Thanksgiving and Praise, quote, “to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens.”

Again, thanksgiving is not so much a day, or something you do as moved. It is a habit, a way of life. The ancient liturgy says “It is truly good, right and salutary that we should at all times and in all places give thanks to you, holy Lord.”

Mom asked me what I’m preaching on today. I told her, “Plasma.” I don’t know whether or not she’s making it today. I hope not. Sometimes she saves it for New Year’s. But if it is there on the table today, glaring at me like it does, I’ll put a spoonful on my plate and I’ll try to say a quiet prayer of thanks too. . . because there are good things to be found even in the plasma . . . and because it will be surrounded by lots of other good things too. Amen.

“Plasma”

Heat 1 can tomato soup with 12 oz. can V8, whisking in 8 oz. pkg. cream cheese.

Soften 3 Tbsp. gelatin in ½ cup water.

Add to soup mixture with 1 cup mayo.

Add salt, Tabasco and red pepper to taste.

Add ¾ cup chopped green pepper, ¾ cup chopped celery, ¼ cup green onion tops, 1 chopped avocado and 1 small onion, chopped. If desired, add shrimp or crab. Chill.

GOOD SHEPHERD LUTHERAN CHURCH

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