**Homily on Gratitude for Thanksgiving Day**

The Rev. Chris Wendell, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

Thanksgiving Day, November 23, 2017

Earlier this month we had a funeral here for a parishioner from back in the 60’s 70’s. As I often do during funeral services, I preached that day in part about love. Specifically, about how the capacity to give and receive love is perhaps the greatest measure of a life well lived.

In the same vein, I think the greatest measure of a person’s spiritual wellness is his or her capacity for gratitude. Perhaps this sounds a bit odd. Wouldn’t the greater measure of spiritual wellness be something like prayerfulness or concern for others or the doing of acts of charity and mercy? Maybe so, but I would argue that in fact, gratitude is at the root of the healthiest expression of each of these virtues.

Most of us first encounter the concept of gratitude as children, shortly after we learn to speak. After mama and dada, I think words 3 and 4 for my kids were probably please and thank you. Most of us who are parents work hard to instill an instinctive impulse in our children to say thank you when given something. We are proud when they remember, slightly embarrassed when they forget. On the surface, this kind of thing seems to be more about the performance of politeness than the actual experience of gratitude. But like all rituals, we experience it first on its most superficial level, so that as we mature in its practice, we begin to ask why exactly we do that. And as our lives unfold, we begin to realize that learning to say thank you is just the tip of the ice berg when it comes to gratitude. Or, as we might say in church language, it’s the outward and visible sign on an inward and spiritual grace.

The well of inward and spiritual grace offered by the practice of gratitude is so deep, it is nearly bottomless. In each phase of our lives, we are invited to lower our bucket further and find new refreshment in the practice of being grateful. At its root, gratitude is fundamentally about acknowledging that we are not at the center of the universe – that our own actions cannot bring about the most desirable outcomes for ourselves or others. We all know people who haven’t figured this out yet: people for whom being thankful really means being glad in their own accomplishments, being pleased that no one stood in the way of their ambitions or their charity, or being proud of their strength in besting those who oppose them. That’s not gratitude. Real gratitude is not about giving thanks for our own successes in life. Rather it is to kneel before a reality larger than ourselves or a world of our own making; to stand in awe of life as it is: beautiful and painful, tender and challenging, unfair and holy. Real gratitude connects us to what is beyond our control: the inherent otherness of other people, the mysteries of life and death, the unceasing love of God.

The Gospel story for this Thanksgiving Day teaches us about this kind of gratitude. It is the story of the 10 lepers. In the passage, the ten lepers cry out to Jesus, “Master have mercy upon us.” Commentators on this story note that this is the ritual expression that beggars would have used in Jesus’ day to ask a passer-by for money or food. It’s the 1st century equivalent of saying “have you got any spare change?”. Their disease, and the ritual impurity and social isolation that came along with it, would certainly have condemned them to a life of abject poverty, in which begging would be their only means of survival. But when they beg from Jesus, he does them one better than just a quarter. He transforms their lives in a way they could not possibly imagine. He gives them everything they need to thrive: health, the ability to work, the chance to be reintegrated into society. He heals them.

As they leave, only one of the lepers turns back and thanks him. This is no mere impulsive social nicety. In fact, it’s the opposite of a dignified handshake. He flings himself at Jesus’ feet and shouts his gratitude in a loud voice. I imagine it was quite an awkward scene. He makes a spectacle of himself. But he can do no other. He understands that the gift he has been given is orders of magnitude more than the aid he had requested. It is quite possibly beyond his comprehension that this kind of healing could ever happen. And it has revealed to him the presence of God at work in his life in a way beyond his control, and until now, even his awareness. His response is an awkward, genuine, and unrestrained thanksgiving to God.

But the climax of the story, is Jesus’ final reply, “your faith as made you well.” This seems completely counterfactual. How could the leper’s faith have made him well, if it only revealed itself after he was healed? And for that matter, what about the other 9 ungrateful lepers who were also healed? Did their faith make them well, too? The answer goes back to the connection between gratitude and spiritual wellness. The faithful leper’s gratitude didn’t make him healthy. Jesus did that, to him and to the other nine. But only this tenth leper has been made both healthy and well. He is well because he is thankful. He is well, because his capacity for gratitude has opened him up to a wider awareness of God. He is well now not just because he counts his blessings, but because he knows where they come from.

How about us? Do we know where our blessings come from? Are we even in touch with all our blessings? If we’re having a hard time with the former question, perhaps it helps to work on the latter. After all, sometimes we start to confuse our accomplishments with our blessings. And I’d suggest they are not the same because, while we can make our own accomplishments, we cannot manufacture our own blessings. They come from only one source, and it isn’t us. This is both good news and bad news. It’s good news because it means that even when our lives are devoid of accomplishment, when everything seems to be falling apart and we feel helpless, when we are out of work or out of favor or even out of time, we are never without blessings. They are still there. All the time. It’s bad news because it means that these most precious things in life we cannot get for ourselves. They must be given to us by a loving God. But then, that is rather good news again isn’t it, because our loving God gives them freely and without reservation and with unending mercy.

One last thought. Earlier I suggested that gratitude is the greatest measure of spiritual health, because all the outward virtues flow from its foundation. Put another way, what I mean is that gratitude is the purest motivation for generosity, prayerfulness and acts of mercy. There are other motivations for the practice of these virtues: guilt, fear of failing to meet some obligation, even self-aggrandizement. While they don’t negate to value of the virtues actions, they tinge the practice of virtue with a kind of spiritual ambivalence. None of them so fully makes us a channel for God’s love and presence in the world as does gratitude. The appreciative attitude liberates our impulses of compassion, generosity, and self-giving to find expression in our messy lives with each other and in our messy lives of prayer with God.

And so, as you count your blessings this Thanksgiving, I pray that God will give you one blessing more: a grateful heart. Amen.