

Community Thanksgiving Service

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10 lepers cured and only one returns to give thanks.

Notice first that their cure wasn't dependent upon any real relationship with Jesus. Even the nine who didn't come back got clean skin anyway. They all sought cures for the reason any leper would seek a cure: to be free of disease, to be released from social stigma, to be able to return to a normal life. All ten were joyful and had great reason to be joyful.

But only one of them was thankful. Only one of them returned to meet the God who was the source of their new life. And, for this single leper, it was not just his body that has been changed: it was his very soul: his relationship with God and God's mercy has been healed.

His act and words of thanksgiving have changed him and he has drawn closer to God. In the words of Jesus, his faith--his very trust in the idea that there was more than magic at work here, his faith brought a healing that was much more than skin deep.

Most of us here tonight probably feel that we have quite a lot of stuff or events to be thankful for--and we do. Food on our table, a roof over our head or good health. If we are lucky, all three.

And, if we are honest with ourselves, much of the good stuff we are thankful for amounts to being the result of our good luck. Being in the right time at the right place to get the job. Living in the right country and having access to the right medicines and hospitals. Being born into a family with means to support us starting off in life. Being born in an age where polio and small pox and the plague are curable. Benefiting from the hard work or hard science of those who have gone before us.

So, if you think about it, very much of what we give thanks for is more a matter of luck than grace, and in giving thanks tomorrow, or tonight, for if we run the risk of being like the 9 lepers: we may be joyful, but we have missed the deeper opportunity to grow closer to God. We will miss the opportunity for healing of our souls. And God, I believe, wants us to be healed in ways that are more than skin deep.

Others of us here tonight may struggle with knowing what to name at the table tomorrow. Some of us may have had terrible years--years where our health was

bad, or people we love died, or we lost a job. Some of us have had terrible years! Years where the luck has run out, at least for a season.

I'd like to propose that it is precisely those times that we have an opportunity to be healed in ways that are more than skin deep. It takes time and effort and it is more than painting a good face on a bad situation--I think we do God a bad turn when we resort to platitudes like "God did this for a reason," or "God doesn't give us any more than we can handle." That makes God out to be some strict parent, or the principal of a military boarding school--not the loving creator or patient shepherd the full story of our Scripture teaches.

So how **do** we give thanks when life is tough? How do we avoid that trap of making God into an idol we must appease rather than the wonderful, merciful God of abundance our Scripture witnesses?

I think we start with redefining abundance. We cast the circle larger than the details of our own lives.

A few years back I had a lesson that really brought this truth home to me. As it happened, I was going through a very hard time in my life, a very sad time of loss and suffering.

It was hard to pray, it was hard to even think, and at the point that this lesson was given, I was really sick of feeling so bad. Thanksgiving and joy were no part of what I was feeling at that time of my life. Added to the fact that I was grieving the loss of a person I loved, I was grieving a lost sense of thanksgiving for my life itself. I was even grieving the loss of the familiarity of being me because life at that moment bore absolutely no resemblance to any life I had known before.

I took a lot of walks those days. I was living in Manhattan and the sidewalks of New York provided lots of opportunity for easing, if only slightly, the acuteness of my sorrow. One day, for no particular reason I can recall, I decided that even though I was currently incapable of **feeling** thanksgiving and joy, there were nonetheless many things in the world that usually **do** bring me joy and for which I am thankful..

And that even if I could not feel my thanksgiving and joy at that moment in my life, I could still express it. I could still pray it. That even though I didn't feel a sense of gratitude, I was nonetheless grateful. So, I decided to break the silence of praise that had inhabited my prayer life during that time and just say thank you to God for things I noticed as I walked.

So it was that walking that day became an observation of what was around me. I

saw a cardinal, of all things. In Manhattan. I checked my mental list of things I like...was I thankful for cardinals? Yes. Thank you God for making cardinals.

I saw children with their parents, each clearly taking pleasure in each other. Did I take delight in that moment? Frankly, no. **But**.....was I thankful for filial love? I checked my mental list. Thank you God for love between parent and child.

I saw sanitation workers. Was I thankful for them? Well, living in New York, I was quite thankful to have garbage trucks and their attendants as a part of my life. You get the idea. For a good 45 minutes I *thought* thankful.

And an amazing thing happened.

When I returned home that day, some of the bleakness had lifted.

And then an even more amazing thing happened: I sat down for a rest before moving on to my next task, my cat came up and nestled himself against my chest. I fell asleep briefly and when I woke up, I felt **more like myself** than I had for weeks.

It didn't last long—I still had plenty of grieving to do. But.... it was enough. It was enough to ground me in life for awhile longer so that I could do that hard work of living life as it was at that moment in time. By simply saying thank you, I remembered who I was, and I remembered what I was up to, living life that held an abundance, given by God, that exceeded the sad details of my life at that moment.

The act of giving thanks is the act of participation in life itself. Not just our own small experience of life in the details of our own lives, but casting the net further, seeing God in places **beyond** our own luck or misfortune.

Someone I read this week called it 'joining God's dance of abundance.' In saying thanks, we join ourselves to God's great drama---- of lilies clothed in beauty and birds who take on faith God's care for them. In saying thanks we say yes, I will participate in the beauty that you given.

We are surrounded with abundance. The very earth upon which we live, the creatures that share our planet with all their delightful diversity. Everything from the sweetcorn and butternut squash grown by our Amish neighbors to the sweet tropical fruit grown in far off places--abundance.

Everything from the cardinals and pheasant and quail that grace our landscape to the colorful macaws that live in the rain forests of South America and the penguins that grace Antarctica. Abundance.

Dolphins and rainbow trout. Abundance. The fact is, abundance given us by God extends far beyond the details of our own personal lives. When we gather at our Thanksgiving table tomorrow, we will all be tempted to be like the 9 lepers--joyful at our good luck rather than thankful for the truly creative love of God that makes all things new, most especially our tired hearts.

Our sense of thanksgiving can so easily be limited to the stuff of our lives-- --I think God asks more of us. In fact, I am confident that God longs to give us more. God wants to heal our hearts and deepen our soul. God wants us to know him and the truth of his abundant love better. And if that isn't a reason to give thanks, I don't know what is!