

November 23, 2014

What is Thanksgiving?

Luke 17:11-19

Opening words: This morning is the Sunday before Thanksgiving, so we are going to look at a traditional Thanksgiving scripture. It comes from the Gospel of Luke. Who was Luke? We know a certain amount about him. He was a Gentile by birth, well educated in Greek culture, and a physician by profession. The church will always remember him as a companion of Paul during his second missionary journey. For this reason, some consider this to be Paul's Gospel. Luke penned this Gospel about the year 70 AD to a specific person, Theophilus, "*lover of God,*" the same person who received the book of Acts. The main character in this Gospel is Jesus, and the main theme in this Gospel is the Messiahship of Jesus. Personally, I love the Gospel of Luke because no one can tell a story quite like him. Today's scripture reading is an excellent example. May God give you ears to hear this morning's scripture lesson, Luke 17:11-19. Let me call this message *What is Thanksgiving?*

Luke 17:11-19 ¹¹ Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance ¹³ and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" ¹⁴ When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed. ¹⁵ One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. ¹⁶ He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?" ¹⁸ Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹ Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

This morning we find ourselves in the seventeenth chapter of Luke. According to the text, Jesus is traveling toward Jerusalem. Chronologically speaking, the end is near. This is chapter seventeen; Luke's version of the Palm Sunday experience is recorded in chapter nineteen. The Master is traveling between the border of Samaria and Galilee. As he travels he encounters various people.

In that list of people are the ten lepers. You may know their story. Leprosy was a highly contagious skin disease caused by a certain bacteria. The disease still exists in our world today. In the United States approximated 100 cases are reported annually. However, today it is treatable. In the days of Jesus it was not. In Jesus' day, victims of leprosy were forced to live in isolation, away from family and friends, in leper colonies. This is the story of the ten men in the scripture lesson. They are living with leprosy without any hope of a cure. Then, they hear the news that gives them hope. Jesus is coming! They have heard of his healing power. They want to run to Jesus. However, they can't. They are mandated by law to keep their distance. The best they can do is yell at Jesus as he passes. This is the good news. Jesus not only hears their desperate voices, but he heals them. As was required by law, Jesus instructs them to go to a priest for inspection. The priests had the authority to grant them permission to re-enter society. In the story, ten men were healed, but only one man returned to Jesus to say, "Thank-you!" One of the ten returned; the other nine just resumed their lives. That fact is disappointing, but it is not shocking. Ingratitude is still part of our world. William Arthur Ward once said, "*Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it.*" Never underestimate the power of gratitude!

There are many ways to express gratitude. I came up with a list of ten ways you can express gratitude. This list is not complete. You can express gratitude in other ways. However, you may have used one of these. You can:

1. Write a thank-you note
2. Buy a gift card
3. Donate to a charity or a church
4. Write a song or poem
5. Donate food to a food bank
6. Make and take a meal to a shut in
7. Give a hug
8. Do a random act of kindness
9. Send flowers
10. Pray for the person

How do you express gratitude? It really doesn't matter how you express gratitude. The only thing that matters is that you express gratitude. One of the nine ungrateful lepers could have written Jesus a poem, for example.

Thanksgiving is this Thursday! Our national theme for the next five days is gratitude. So today, I want to help you discover the true spirit of gratitude. I hope to do that by answering the question, *what is Thanksgiving?* I will give you three answers. Each one is correct. First, Thanksgiving is a **holiday**. Second, Thanksgiving is **an opportunity**. Third, Thanksgiving is **an attitude**. So if you are ready to begin, say, “Amen!”

Holiday

First, Thanksgiving is a holiday. Did you know Thanksgiving did not become a national holiday until 1941? However, Americans have been observing a day of thanksgiving for generations. Historians tell us the first recorded thanksgiving took place in Jamestown, Virginia. The winter of 1610 was harsh at Jamestown. Many settlers died. The group that once totaled 409 had been reduced to 60. Tradition tells us the survivors prayed for help, without knowing when or how it might come. When help arrived, in the form of a ship filled with food and supplies from England, a prayer meeting was held to give thanks to God. There is no mention of a feast. Maybe that is why it is not the famous Thanksgiving?

The Thanksgiving we know happened in 1621. Do you remember the story? The Pilgrims left Southampton, England in 1620. They wanted religious freedom. There was trouble from the start. As they sailed around the south tip of the British Isles, one of the ships, the *Speedway*, was ruled not seaworthy. The two ships stopped and some of the Pilgrims went home. However, some of the *Speedway's* passengers boarded the second ship, the *Mayflower*. History tells us the trip took longer than the estimated 66 days. They had navigation problems too. They wanted to go to Virginia, but they arrived in New England. It was November and the weather was growing harsh. There was no time to build permanent shelters, so they survived that first winter in this new world in crude temporary housing. In time, disease came and the death toll began to rise. Only 51 of the original 102 saw the spring. The dead were buried in unmarked graves so the local natives would not know how small their numbers had grown. When the spring came they were forced to make a painful choice. The *Mayflower* was a rented ship, and had to return to England. Would they stay in America or return to England? They decided to stay and their luck began to change. Friendly Native Americans helped them plant 30 acres of wheat and build permanent shelters.

By the fall of 1621, their homes were built and their crops were harvested. They decided to observe a day of thanksgiving to thank God for his blessings. The story doesn't end there.

One hundred and sixty-two years after the Pilgrims, George Washington declared a Thanksgiving Day in 1783. The reason was simple. The Revolution was over. Eighty years later, in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the last Thursday in November 1863, as "a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father." Each year afterward, for 75 years, the President formally proclaimed that Thanksgiving Day should be celebrated on the last Thursday of November. But in 1939, President Franklin D. Roosevelt set it one week earlier. He wanted to help the struggling economy by lengthening the shopping season. In 1941, Congress declared the fourth Thursday of November a national holiday, Thanksgiving! What is Thanksgiving? It is a holiday! And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Opportunity

Second, Thanksgiving is an opportunity. Go back to the scripture lesson. The one who came back to thank Jesus seized the opportunity. The other nine missed their opportunity. They may have returned later to thank Jesus, but he was gone. They missed their opportunity. On Thanksgiving Day you will be surrounded by the most important people in your life. Don't be a coward; be brave! Tell them how you really feel. Thanksgiving is an opportunity.

Do you remember the story of the rich young ruler? Matthew, Mark and Luke have their own versions of the same story. If you put them together, then you get the complete picture. He had it all! He was rich, so he could buy what he wanted. He was young, so he had his health and a future. He was a ruler, so he had influence. He had everything, but he didn't have the most important thing, salvation. So he asked the Master, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asked him if he had kept all the commandments that have to do with relationships. Had he ever murdered, committed adultery, stolen or offered false witness? Did he honor his parents? Did he love his neighbors? He kept those commandments. Then Jesus commands him to do something he could not do, sell his possessions and give the profits to the poor. It is not a command of poverty. Do you remember last week? It is a command of priority. It is important that you remember this today because you are about to turn in your estimate of giving cards. Jesus is saying God must be your top priority. How you spend your money reveals your priorities. The man left feeling bad for two reasons. First, he had to admit God wasn't his top priority. Second, he felt like he missed his one opportunity at salvation.

I hope you don't miss your opportunity! On Thanksgiving, seize the opportunity to tell the people in your life how you really feel. Tell the oldest people in your life you love them. Tell the youngest people in your life you are proud of them. Tell that difficult person in your life you are sorry. Build a relationship with them one more time. Seize the opportunity that Thanksgiving presents. Thanksgiving is an opportunity. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Attitude

Third and finally, Thanksgiving is an attitude. The man in the story returned to Jesus in a spirit of gratitude. Verse 16 says he threw himself at the feet of Jesus and thanked him. He demonstrated his appreciation. His attitude toward Jesus completes the story. Your attitude can make or break any situation. Do you have anyone in your life who can ruin a happy gathering with a bad attitude?

Many of you remember my father-in-law, Vern. We had a good relationship, so I feel comfortable saying this. He would admit he had a bad attitude. He was a salty old guy, critical and negative. During the last several years of his life, he lived at Copeland Oaks with my mother-in-law. It is a wonderful place, but Vern was always so negative. I regularly made those trips to visit them. Every visit was the same. Vern complained about everything; only the topic changed.

One day he started on Copeland Oaks. He complained the about the noise in the hallways, because everyone was deaf. Everyone has to yell. He complained about the food. Everything was tasteless and the desserts were too small. He complained about the gardening program. The residents were like slave labor. They grew the vegetables, but Copeland Oaks used them for their own purposes. He complained about the building. It was falling apart. The elevator broke the other day, and a group of old goats were trapped. They were trapped with one of the smelly, ugly, hairy kitchen ladies wearing a hair net. That was Vern's normal routine. He could ruin any happy experience with his bad attitude. Annually, he tried to ruin Thanksgiving. However, that day was different. I really listened to him and began to wonder about Copeland Oaks. I have parishioners who live at Copeland Oaks; I have referred people to Copeland Oaks.

I decided to check Vern's story out by visiting a family friend, who also lived at Copeland Oaks. I had known Earl for years; he worked with my father. When I got to his apartment, he greeted me with a big smile. He gave me a hug. I asked him, "How is life at Copeland Oaks?" He said, "It is great! I only regret not moving here sooner." I said, "Do you find the hallways noisy?" He said, "No! I love to hear people laughing and enjoying themselves." I asked, "How is the food?" He said, "Look at me; I am getting fat!" I said, "I hear some of the residents have a garden." He said, "I am a gardener. It is great! We sell the crops and give the money to various missions." He began to pick up steam and started to tell me all the wonderful things about Copeland Oaks. I looked at my watch. It was growing late and I had to get back. I said, "Earl, it was great to see you, but I have to go. He said, "Let me tell you one more thing. The other day, I was in the elevator with some of the guys. It stopped between floors. We were squeezed into the elevator with one of the young ladies who works in the kitchen. She is quite a looker! Her name is Debbie. She was pressed up against me!" He said, "Russ, I haven't been that close to a young hot woman in long time. It was great! I think my heart went out of rhythm. The only problem is, they fixed the elevator too fast. I could have stood there with Debbie pressed up against me for a lot longer! I like the name Debbie!"

How can it be that two people can have the same experience, and experience two different things? The answer is one word, attitude! Are you going to ruin your Thanksgiving with a bad attitude? Are you going to ruin someone else's Thanksgiving with your bad attitude? This is a better question. Do the people in your life find you exhilarating, or exhausting? And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

What is Thanksgiving? First, Thanksgiving is a **holiday**. We have been celebrating Thanksgiving for over 400 years! Second, Thanksgiving is an **opportunity**. Don't miss your opportunity to express your feelings about the people in your life. Don't be a coward. Don't miss your opportunity to say, "I am sorry." Don't miss your opportunity to say, "I am proud of you." Don't miss your opportunity to say, "I love you!" Third and finally, Thanksgiving is an **attitude**. Do the people in your life find you exhilarating, or exhausting? What makes them happier? Are they happier when you come, or are they happier when you go? There is an old Estonian Proverb you may want to remember this Thursday. *Who does not thank for little will not thank for much.* And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"