

Living, Giving Thanks
Luke 17:11-19
Sermon preached by Rev. Jessica McCrae
11 October 2020

We all have something to be thankful for, and on this Thanksgiving, like every Thanksgiving Sunday that has gone before, people across Canada are doing just that, making a mental tally of all the things for which they are grateful. Many of us think back to those childhood essays we wrote back in school listing all of those things. Or we remember the time honoured tradition of sitting around the table with all of our family and friends recounting one by one the thing for which we were most thankful. It is a beautiful tradition and one that really should be incorporated into every day of our lives, if it isn't already. Even in these pandemic days, we have a lot to be thankful for.

And I think most of us live from a place of thanksgiving more often than not – sometimes it manifests itself as thanksgiving for thanksgivings sake and other times it is a way to help us get through the day. I'm always amazed when I meet with a person or a family who seems to have had more than their fair share of difficulties heaped upon them, or those

people who are struggling with pain and fear that seems insurmountable how more often than not they seem to immediately take the road of thankfulness in our discussions. Not thankfulness for the calamity that has befallen them necessarily, but the conversation usually goes to “Well, we just have to give thanks for the incredible doctors that we have. We have to give thanks that we live here, so close to world class hospitals. I’m just so thankful for my son and his family. I’m just thankful that ...” fill in the blank. I’m just so thankful that I live here and not there. I’m just so thankful I have family and am not alone. I’m just so thankful that I have a pension and health care and money in my bank account and food on my plate. I’m just so thankful that things aren’t worse.

When things are bad sometimes that is the only thanksgiving prayer we can raise. Thank God it isn’t worse. But it is still thanksgiving; it is still the image of the light of hope shining in the darkness, however faintly.

Maybe in order to truly appreciate the light we need to know darkness. Afterall, it really is human nature to compare our situation to others less fortunate in order to gain perspective and appreciate all we have. But that also becomes the tension of Thanksgiving, doesn’t it? We

have much to be grateful for, there is just so much in our world, so much that is life giving, sustaining and nourishing. But there is an awful lot that isn't too. There is an awful lot that is unfair, unjust and defeating. If we're honest, if we care about the world beyond our own door then that dichotomy makes true thanksgiving difficult doesn't it? Look around – the economy is uncertain, covid numbers are rising, there is political instability and racial tensions south of the border, our “old normal” is gone, the arctic is melting, the seas are rising, forest fires and hurricanes are bigger than ever ... am I missing anything?

Of course there are also the events that may be occurring in your own life: grief, job loss, divorce, disease, anxiety, addiction, uncertainty. There is the fact that millions of children are living below the poverty line here in North America and countless millions more in the rest of the world. What will the next year bring? Truth is, that while we can lull ourselves for one day into thinking that we have it all here in Canada, tomorrow the sun will once again shine on the reality that while we are certainly blessed, our world is in pain, and that pain is a very real part of our lives.

But still we are called to give thanks, and to give thanks not just in a comfy Hallmark holiday kind of way, but called to give thanks as Christians – as people of faith - who know that light shines in the darkness; called to give thanks as people who know that we are participants in an unfolding story, co-creators in a new world here amongst the mess of this world. So how do we do that? How do we do that in a world that is so difficult, with hearts that can be so easily broken? We look beyond ourselves. We look beyond ourselves and we give, we give to others, we give to the world, we share hope, and friendship, and compassion, we go into this world of ours and we walk with another.

Because real thanksgiving is not about simply, passively gathering around the table, gathering in our pews, or gathering at our cottages and speaking words of gratitude and thanksgiving. As people who engage the world with hope, we do not merely turn to God in triumphal praise for all that has been bestowed upon us. We look to God as we turn to the world, with active thankful response, sharing whatever it is we have to create a richer world, a world in which every need can be met eventually.

Consider our gospel lesson, a lesson on giving thanks. We know of course from what is recorded in scripture that after the healing, one, only one of ten returned to Jesus to give thanks. And this man is a Samaritan, a foreigner, whom it would seem, less was expected of. This story is often read as a moral lesson on the appropriateness of manners, of giving thanks where thanks is due. Theologians will tell you it is a foreshadowing of the rejection Jesus will face by his own community. And these interpretations aren't wrong. But perhaps there is another lesson too. When he had healed them, Jesus explicitly told the 10 to go to the priests, to head to Jerusalem to the temple to show themselves and one assumes to give God thanks. Now remember, the one who returned to Jesus was a foreigner. It is doubtful that even if he had followed Jesus' directions he would have been allowed entry to the temple priests or that doing this would have had any direct bearing on his life. The temple meant nothing to him, so he did what he could and bravely returned to Jesus and thanked him. And then went home to his own people.

But what about the other nine? I like to think when Jesus asks "Where are the others? Were not ten healed?" that he said it not with the

resignation that a modern reading often infers, but instead asked it with a twinkle in his eye, with expectation and hope. “Where not ten healed? What are they up to right now?”

Where are they now?

I like to think they did just as they were directed. They embarked on a journey to Jerusalem to show themselves to the priests in order to get clearance, to be deemed clean in order that they might pick up their lives again where they left off. When their life was restored, I hope they jumped right in there and rebuilt those relationships, not wasting a minute of their new life.

We have a choice with this story. We can choose to believe that the other 9 men were merely ungrateful, insensitive men who took whatever healing they could get before disappearing into the night. Or we can choose to believe more than that. We can choose to believe that after getting to Jerusalem, moved and impassioned with the new life and new hope that coursed through their formerly diseased bodies they re-entered the community that had expelled them. There, I believe they told their stories to anyone who would listen: stories of how a stranger, a traveler,

had touched their lives with healing and with hope, and how even in the darkest of dark times the candle of hope still burns, still heals, still brings life. I think they tell a story about how just as they were about to give up hope entirely someone, something, entered their lives and changed them. That is what I imagine we would find if we followed the 9 beyond the border; a story of generosity and hope, of adding their experience of new life to those of others, so that the hungriest among them could feast. I imagine in their own way, they created the very first Thanksgiving feast. Not a feast of harvest and turkeys and pumpkins, but a feast of hope and love and generosity built around the unexpected gift they received from a stranger in the border country.

And so, in the spirit of these mysterious 9 who did not return, in the spirit of the mysterious 9 who disappeared into the Jerusalem streets with their stories, let us give thanks. Let us give thanks not just for the abundance that is ours, not because our situation is so much better than that of others. No, this Thanksgiving, let us give thanks for the opportunities that are ours, for the opportunity to witness to the existence of an unimaginable light of hope and love, a light so strong it can illumine

the darkest nights and hardest hearts. Let us give thanks that we have the opportunity to leave this place, this border area between the peace of God and the chaos of the world and re-enter our community with our stories of how healing is given and love is shared. Let us go into the world, take what we have, and offer it to create a true feast of justice and hope.

Amen.