

Sunday October 13th, 2019
Thanksgiving

PRAYER: O Lord God, who creates us in your image and makes us stewards of the good earth, we marvel at the trust you place in us. Despite the depths to which we sometimes descend, we know that we were meant for heights. Despite our crucifixion of the earth, we know it was made for resurrection. Be with us, O Lord; help us to reclaim the image in which you make us and to renew the earth on which you place us. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: God, who values each sparrow, loves us immeasurably more. In Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, we, God's creatures, are forgiven.

STEWARDSHIP: God is good and out of his goodness, he binds up the wounds of the afflicted. In recognition of God eternal goodness, we come now with thanksgiving for his boundless acts of mercy. We pray that God will use our offerings to heal the suffering, shelter the homeless, comfort the lonely, and make whole once again those whose lives are broken. We give what we have in the name of Christ, who gave to all who believe the gift of hope.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

The delightful hymn speaks of “plowing fields and scattering seeds”, but these are not familiar activities for us O Lord. Those of us in the city are far removed from agricultural pursuits but no less dependent on them. For every bite of food, we enjoy, has come from some farm in some corner of the globe. Thank you, Gracious God, for the bounty we enjoy, and in these modern days the variety of food we can encounter. Thank you for the men and women who toil long hours to provide us the fuel we need to sustain our bodies. Thank you for the men and women, who process, transport, distribute and retail our food. It is amazing how complex our food industry has become and at the same time how far removed we are from the place our food comes from. Let us never take for granted your kindness, O God, in pouring such a bounty on us, especially when there are so many people in this world who are never sure day to day if they will have anything to eat.

Food security is the greatest challenge for so many vulnerable people, that we ask you, O God, to provide in abundance as only you can to those in need of bread to eat and clean water to drink.

Thank you for organizations that serve the poor and hungry in this world, like The Sharing way, World Vision, our own Caring Cupboard and First Serving, and many others. Help us to be willing partners with them in offering our bounty to save lives.

We thank you for modern medicine that preserves our health. How stunning the advances in medicine have been, with medications, and technology to treat what just a few years ago were untreatable. Thank you for the researchers who strive to end the suffering of the ill, the doctors and lab technicians who diagnose and the nurses and personal care workers who bring comfort and meet immediate needs of the vulnerable. Thank you also for chaplains and family members who sit by bedsides, and journey with those whose strength is gone and who need reassurance. But Father we are aware today that for every x-ray and CAT scan that happens daily in our city there are countless others in this world who struggle against parasites and disease that are unknown to us because they have inferior water and sanitation. Again, O God, we thank you for those ministries that go to the very worst places on earth to bring hope, and relief of suffering.

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Thank you, O God, for the precious men and women who seek to mend the broken hearted and those overcome by fractured minds and souls. We may call them counselors, therapists, doctors, ministers, but they are really your gift of a special friend. Bless these special people as they guide and comfort, challenge and persevere with the ones whose wounds are not evident to our eyes. Grant us the maturity and humility to admit when we ourselves need help, and thank you in advance for those caring professionals who train and prepare for the time we may need them.

This is but a small list of the many ways you care and provide, O Lord. Thank you for your shower of many blessings, and help make us more generous to share those blessings with others. Grant us peace and contentment with what we have and not so mindful of what we lack. Grant us an appreciation of those parts of life that are truly valuable, like: friendship, love, family, and laughter. Those things which we believe are free and yet are invaluable.

Thank you for meeting us here today, as a community. Prepare our hearts for your word to us. Speak the truth as only you can, into the very corners of our souls. Shatter our pride, reveal our ignorance, heal our divisions and bring us unified into your throne room. For we offer our lives to you and our prayers in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray saying....

BENEDICTION: O Lord, as you bless our fields with harvest, now fill our hearts with generous care; that, as we remember what you do for us in the yield of our lands, we will ponder what we can do for you through the labour of our hands. Amen.

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Luke 17:11-19

“How Thankful are You?”

The story goes that the local Baptist minister decided he would visit Woodbine Racetrack for the first time. Everything at Woodbine looked so foreign to him and he was not sure how to proceed. It was then that he noticed among the crowd a Catholic Priest. The minister figured that if he stayed close enough to the priest, he would learn what to do. And so, he stayed close and paid special attention to what the priest did as the first race was about to start.

The minister watched as the priest read over the racing form, and came to horse number 3, and then made a few signs with his hands over the racing form and went and placed his bet. Later, in the first race, number 3 came in first and paid out at 7 to 1. The minister thought, “Boy this is really something.” The second race was about to begin and again the priest was observed reading over the racing form, picking out horse number 7 and making a few signs over it.

Sure enough, number 7 came in and paid out at 12 to 1. The minister really believed he had stumbled onto a great thing. So, when the third race was about to start, the minister watched very carefully as the priest read the form, picked out number 9 and made a few signs over it. The minister hurried to the betting window, and bet all he had on number 9. Needless to say, number nine never even showed up for the race or as they say he was “scratched” and the minister lost all his money.

So, after the race, the minister went over to the good father or priest and explained that he had watched him give blessings to the horses, and the first two won but the third cost him all his money. The minister demanded to know what happened. And the priest said, “Sorry I am that you lost all your money. But ‘tis a shame you don’t know the difference between a blessing and the last rites.” (Hal McKay-Treasury of Humour)

I have noticed, of late, that more and more of us are living life as distant observers. Like the minister in the story we think it is best to, as unobtrusively as possible, watch how others live their lives and try to imitate their success. As technology increasingly invades our lives, we find ourselves no longer needing to interact with other human beings to receive information or advice.

Google any problem or issue on the internet and perhaps thousands, if not even millions of pages of data become available to anyone with a laptop, or now, a smart phone. Creeping into our society is the very real possibility that technology is being used more and more to help us avoid the messiness or awkwardness of human interactions. Tweets, twitters, text messages, Facebook updates, email blasts, can all keep us up to date on even the most minute details of someone’s life, all without having to have the unpleasantness of a conversation.

Relationships end, business deals close, life altering choices are made via the internet or via text messages.

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Life is quickly becoming lived “AT A DISTANCE”. I understand the attraction of this approach. Keeping the world, and the people in it at arm’s length, is far less costly to our emotional wellbeing. We even have a sociological word for it called “Cocooning”. And so, we’ve come to the point where believing the public perception of someone is far easier than taking the time to learn who they really are.

Maybe some of you have had this experience. You know of someone, famous or not, whose reputation has preceded them to you, and you have decided that you just don’t like them. From the snippets of news or gossip from others, you have concluded that they are simply not a very nice person. A good example of this is a politician. You read about them, hear others opinions and you decide they are not fit to lead.

But then let’s say you actually meet this person. You have a coffee together and they open themselves up to you, and you discover that there is much more to this person than you thought and frankly they aren’t that bad. Have you even had something like that happen? So, what changed? Why has your opinion of this person improved? I should state the opposite can happen as well where someone you like at a distance proves to be very unlikable after you meet them. What changed?

The truth about anyone, no matter how much is: written about them, revealed on Facebook, or shared around the water cooler, can never be ascertained until you get to know them personally. Just ask those men or women who pick dates from internet dating sites. The reality is, I can say anything I want in an internet profile, but the deeper someone gets to know me, the more the truth about who I really am gets revealed.

I was thinking about all of this as I considered the meaning of Thanksgiving and the Gospel lesson today. As we sit down to enjoy turkey and pumpkin pie, as enjoyable as that is; what does this actually say about our level of thankfulness to God. The ten lepers in the Gospel story raise this issue for me, and I think for all of us. To begin with, we cannot overstate how terrible their situation was.

Leprosy, a word used in the bible to speak of several serious skin diseases, was a life sentence to isolation. Enough was known about this disease, to know it was contagious. One small cut on your bare feet as you walked, which most people did in Jesus’ day, was enough to pick up the bacteria. Over time the sufferer, became deformed, not by the leprosy but by secondary infections they picked up because they lost nerve function.

Miserable, ill, poor, lonely: lepers would often seek each other out in isolated places to support each other as best they could. They kept close to villages so that they could seek from a distance, the charity of others; perhaps food and maybe clothing. From a distance, lepers lived their lives observing the normal activities of others and slowly wasting away in despair. Also, those who were disease free would watch them from a distance, keeping away lest they become infected.

Now, as the gospel reports, Jesus happened along on his way to Jerusalem through the village near where these ten lepers tried to live.

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It was a village along the border with Samaria, which explains why there was at least one Samaritan in the group. Notice that the Jewish/Samaritan feud mattered not when confronted by a shared tragedy. Misery truly does love company. It is clear from the Gospel record that stories of Jesus had filtered down to the lepers. Almost certainly, they had heard of Jesus' reputation for healing, even healing lepers. So far however, it is just rumours, maybe a false hope.

Out of their desperation, after all they had no other options for healing, they stand together at a distance as the Jewish law demanded, and cried out. Now many commentators see their call to Jesus as a kind of prayer, a petition if you will, and that is a strong possibility. "Jesus, (They knew his name), Master, (They knew his reputation), have mercy on us!"

Let us be clear here, in stating for the record that none of these lepers had ever met Jesus before. They knew of him by rumour and reputation only. But, kind of like a "Hail Mary" pass they shouted in one voice to him to heal them. Have you ever prayed like that? Desperate, isolated, not knowing where to turn: you throw up to God a Hail Mary prayer and hope for the best. Not really expecting anything, but what have you got to lose? A foxhole prayer if you will.

In the case of the lepers, Jesus is said to have "looked at them", meaning he saw the depths of their despair and misery. He had compassion on them and told them, "Go show yourselves to the priests." This command was to fulfill the law which stated that only a priest could declare a former leper clean of the disease. Again, what do they have to lose, so they head off, and immediately as they set off, they were healed.

Now here is my point from this story. The ten lepers were healed. Wonderful! Marvelous! Praise God! BUT...How much do they know about the one who healed them, and do they really care to know him? They were all happy, excited, looking forward to returning home to family and friends; but who healed them. Is he just a traveling healer, whose reputation can only grow after this, amazing miracle?

I think we do this story a great disservice by concluding that the nine who did not return were not thankful. I am sure they were. They may have even said a prayer of thanks to God as they rushed to the priests. I am sure that when God answers our prayers for help, we are thankful as well. The issue in this story is not who is thankful and who is not. The issue is who is willing to get to know the one who answered their prayer.

The nine who did not return, are like so many of us. We cry out in desperation, longing for help, but then we move on with our lives without seeing the miracle as an invitation to greater intimacy with God in Christ. Can you honestly say that your: healing, your new job, your restored relationship or whatever you sought God's help on, has brought you to the feet of Jesus?

Are you closer to him than you were or have you just gone back to your regular former life, acting as if nothing has transpired?

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Consider this for a moment. Almost every day of my life, someone, somewhere, helps me with something. Sometimes I ask for help, and sometimes they see my need and respond on their own accord. Most of the time I am wise enough to acknowledge their help and state “thank you”. The help can be anything from a simple courtesy like holding a door to something quite serious, like a lawyer helping you in a difficult circumstance.

However, and this is a critical point, being grateful doesn’t mean I know my benefactor any better. Think about this for a moment. Most of the time, people who help me are and remain strangers, or maybe all I ever really know about them is simply their names or occupation.

After they help me, I simply move on with my normal everyday existence and often I may never see them again. It is a bold statement I put before you today, but I think we’ve reduced Thanksgiving to this level. We think that somehow if we go through the motions of voicing our thanks to God, we done our duty, and we can just go back to our regular lives. When what God wants is not our words, but our hearts.

The Samaritan was thankful and as I said I truly believe the other nine were as well but more than being thankful, the Samaritan wanted to know intimately the one who healed him. Who was this man, prophet, or Messiah who did this great thing for me?

Our relationship with God has got to be much more than a simple transaction where we put in a few expressions of gratitude and hope for the best. Have we not more faith than to treat God as our last resort, or some sort of cosmic insurance policy where we throw up our frantic prayers? Do we not want to know him and relate to him and love him on a deeper level?

When Jesus says to the Samaritan man “Stand up and go. Your faith has made you well.” what exactly does he mean? Does he mean that only this man had his leprosy healed? I cannot believe that for a moment. If that were so, Jesus would appear cruel, sending these people off to the priest only to have received false hope. I think that the healing the man received, because of his faith, is more than getting rid of leprosy.

I believe that Jesus is referring to the brokenness, isolation and estrangement from God that plagues mankind. All ten lepers got their skin disease cleaned up, but only the Samaritan got his soul cleaned up. The same is true for us. God may answer all kinds of our prayers, but to be truly healed, we need a relationship with God in Christ. We cannot afford to spend our energy at keeping God at a distance, shouting desperate prayers at him.

To do so, is to rob ourselves of so much richness and blessing that God wants to offer all of us. God wants to address our immediate need, whether it be leprosy or something else, but more importantly God wants to address our eternal need. And for that to happen we have to have a relationship with Christ. We have to “walk with him and talk with him and let him tell us we are his own”; to borrow from the hymn.

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As Jesus demonstrated, God does not wish to force us to confront him, but waits patiently for the time to come when we will seek Him out. He longs for us to seek after Him with heart and mind and soul. God's heart is something like a small child who was playing hide-and-seek with some children. She went away and hid herself. But the other children acted cruelly.

While she was hiding, they ran away and left her behind. When the little girl realized she had been abandoned by her friends, she went running home and threw herself into her father's arms and cried, "Daddy, I was hiding and nobody tried to find me!" The father hugged his daughter and said, "God understands. He understands more than you realize." Indeed, it must be the ultimate frustration of God that we seldom seek Him out.

Yes, we need to express out thanks to God for everything God has done for us but there is something we need to do even more this Thanksgiving weekend. We need to know Christ personally, and if we are truly thankful for what he has done for us, we will do just that. I offer these thoughts as something for us to chew on today, along with our turkey and stuffing.