



First Parish in Brewster  
Rev. Erik Walker Wikstrom

**LET US GIVE THANKS**  
*November 25, 2007*

**First Reading:** “Wampanoags are a fishing, hunting, and planting people. There was always enough bounty for feasts throughout the year. With four distinct prolific seasons, the Wampanoag harvested different types of food each season. The animal, fish, bird, and plant relatives of the Native people have life cycles and migration patterns which make this possible. Thanksgiving is a commitment to all living things we accept as food to sustain our lives. More important than a feast or occasion, Thanksgiving is a concept from ancient times.”  
~ *Ramona Peters, Mashpee Wampanoag*

**Second Reading:** “Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos into order, confusion into clarity.... It turns problems into gifts, failures into success, the unexpected into perfect timing, and mistakes into important events. Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today and creates a vision for tomorrow.”  
~ *Melodie Beattie*

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I would like to talk this morning about thanksgiving. About giving thanks. And I'd like to begin with a story I heard about an old family grace. I can't recall if I read this somewhere, or if I heard someone tell it, but the story revolves around a man and the grace his father use to say before dinner each night — "For what we are about to receive may we be truly thankful." The man grew up with this prayer, but had never really given it much thought — "For what we are about to receive may we be truly thankful." A prayer of thanksgiving before the evening meal.

But one day in his adulthood the man realized that this prayer from his childhood, this prayer he knew so well, was not, after all, a prayer of thanksgiving as he had always thought. In reality, the grace his father recited every night was a prayer of petition — not "for what we are about to receive we *are* truly thankful," but, "for what we are about to receive *may we be* truly thankful." This prayer was not about *giving* thanks but about *asking for* the gift of gratitude, and this confused him because he had never thought of gratitude as something for which you needed to ask, as a gift.



May we be truly thankful. The gift of gratitude.

Hold that thought.

In a story from the Christian Scriptures, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is going through the region between Galilee and Samaria when he is approached by ten lepers who call out to him to have mercy upon them. Jesus tells them to go and

show themselves to the priests, and as they turn to do so they are "made clean." One, seeing that he is now healed and whole, turns back to Jesus, praises God and gives thanks for his healing. Jesus says, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?" And he looks at this one who returned and says, "Get up and go on your way, your faith has made you well."

Now there are a lot of ways of looking at this passage. It is, obviously, a healing story, a story of both the metaphoric and the literal healing power of Jesus' ministry. But it's rather odd as healing stories go. For one thing, it's missing the healing! The lepers call out for Jesus' mercy and he tells them to go and present themselves to the priests. Mosaic law required lepers and other "unclean" persons who had been healed to present themselves to the priests who would attest to their healing, but these lepers had not yet been healed! Jesus tells them to go and present themselves *before* they are healed. Now somewhere in transit they are (in the passive voice) "made clean," but the healing takes place "off stage," as it were, after the lepers have left Jesus but before they get to the priests. The healing is implicit rather than explicit, and that's very unusual in a healing story.

Another way of looking at this passage is to see it as part of Luke's message that Jesus' ministry was not just to Jews and that, in fact, it was often better received by those outside the mainstream Jewish community. This is a recurrent theme in the Gospel of Luke who stresses the universality of Jesus' message; it is, it seems, one of the author's main points. And in this story, which only Luke recounts, we are told that the one who returned to praise God and thank Jesus for his healing was a Samaritan. "Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. . . . And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, 'Were not ten made clean? . . . Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?'" This theme is even reinforced in the setting of the story — "the region between Samaria and Galilee" — the borderland, if you will, right on the edge of the home of the outsider.

So we could examine this story as an unusual healing story or as part of Luke's effort to describe the universal nature of Jesus' ministry, but I want to spend the time allotted me this morning in a third approach — looking at the leper who returned to give thanks, the nine who did not, and what this story can tell us about the need for the "gift of gratitude."

One of my favorite authors when I was growing up was the Episcopal priest Martin Bell. He wrote poems and songs and stories and essays, wonderful pieces that continue to catch my imagination and my delight. In his book *The Way of the Wolf: the gospel in new images* there is an essay entitled, "Where Are the Nine?" In it he imagines reasons why each of the nine lepers failed to return that day.

One was scared, unable to understand what had taken place, and so he ran off to hide. The second was offended, thinking that it had all been too easy, that she should have had to work hard, fast hard, pray hard for her healing; it was just too easy and, so she was offended. The third realized, too late, that without his leprosy he no longer knew who he was, that he had so identified with his illness that he was lost without it. The fourth (and this one is my favorite) was so overjoyed that she simply forgot to come back. The fifth had been so embittered by his experiences that he could no longer say "thank you" to anyone. The sixth was finally free to return to her family, and was hurrying home without another thought. The seventh didn't believe in miracles and, so, didn't realize that Jesus had had anything to do with his healing. The eighth *did* believe that Jesus had healed her, and was off spreading the Good News that the Messiah had arrived. Bell leaves open the reason for the ninth.

But I think I may know. Rev. Bell covers a lot of ground in his essay, describes a great many reasons why someone might not return to give thanks, but there's at least one I think he left out, a reason which ties us back to the story of that well-known grace and the idea that we must pray for the gift of gratitude: the truth is, it can be hard to say, "thank you."

Well, that's not really true. It's easy to say "thank you," but it can be tremendously hard to really mean it. To say, with all your heart and soul, "thank you" is a very humbling thing. It means admitting that there was a hole in my life which you have just filled, that there was something I needed which you had and which I now have only because of your generosity.

American popular culture praises self-sufficiency, honors those who stand on their own, asking for and needing nothing from anyone but themselves. Did John Wayne or Clint Eastwood ever ask for help when they were cleaning up a town? Did Sigourney Weaver ask for help when she was battling aliens? Did Superman or Batman or Wonder Woman? They all got help, of course, but they never asked for it and they never really did say "thank you" afterwards. These heroes, these American icons are, in fact, the ones being thanked, the ones to whom everyone else goes for help. John Donne aside, these figures *are* islands, standing alone and aloof, needing no one. Strength of character, in popular American imagery, means never having to say "thank you."

I've often wondered why it's so hard for people to write "thank you" notes. Sometimes it's because we're expected to say "thanks" for socks and underwear — never an easy thing — but I think part of the reticence is simply because it can be so hard to say "thank you." Perhaps it's "better to give than to receive" in part because when you receive you've got to write all those "thank you" notes. You've got to humble yourself, you have to acknowledge both your lack and the other person's fullness, you need to publicly state that you cannot stand alone.

And note that the Samaritan who returned didn't just shake Jesus' hand and say "thanks" or mail him a Hallmark card, he "prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him." Whether actually or metaphorically that prostration, that humbling of oneself, is a necessary part of a deep, heart-felt "thank you," and for us independent, self-sufficient, stand-on-your-own-two-feet type folks that's not an easy thing to do. It *is* part of the Judeo-Christian culture, to be sure, to walk humbly with each other and in the sight of God — it's a part of just about every spiritual tradition the world has known — but humility is decidedly not one of the chief virtues of the secular culture which surrounds us on every side. And so in that culture a "thank you" that is more than lip service — a truly deep sign of heartfelt gratitude — is not an everyday occurrence. It's not easy.

And yet, my reading of the Scriptures — and I'm referring here to the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, of course, but also the Scriptures of Hinduism, of Buddhism, of Islam — when I read the sacred literature of the holy traditions of the world I hear an unmistakable call not just to say "thank you" from the heart, but to live a life of profound and unending gratitude. In the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes that we should give "thanks to God at all times and for all things." An elder and lore keeper of the Wampanoag nation, a man named Medicine Story, writes that gratitude has always been an important part of his people's way of life — "Maushop taught the human beings to be glad and to thank all of our relatives for their contribution to Creation," he writes. The Vietnamese poet and Buddhist monk Tich Nhat Hanh teaches that we should live our lives in deep awareness and profound gratitude. The Christian mystic Meister Eckhart wrote, "If you can only manage one prayer in your life, and it is 'thank you,' it will be sufficient."

We live in a troubled world, there is no way around that. There are wars and rumors of war, and far too often those who struggle for peace and hope are murdered by fear and distrust. There is hunger, rampant and devastating. Women and children are not safe in

the streets, nor all too often even in their own homes. People have to struggle for the "special right" simply to be themselves, free from hate and prejudice. For far too many, true equality remains an elusive dream. Jobs move away. Health deteriorates. Relationships crumble.

And yet, even in the face of all this I believe we are called to be thankful, because even in the midst of all this pain and privation, miracles abound. Tich Nhat Hanh notes that while there is much suffering in the world there is also the blue sky, sunshine, and the eyes of a baby. "It would be a pity," he writes, "if we are only aware of suffering." In another essay Martin Bell wrote, "Being thankful means saying yes to life in spite of all the obvious suffering and brokenness and guilt that's involved. It means enduring unbearable hardships for no other reason than to show up again tomorrow and be part of this whole wild cosmic adventure."

Living a Life of Gratitude, keeping always a "thank you" on our lips and in our hearts, is the key to living a life of Joy, and both are tied in with being Awake and Aware. Living life so that you see the lilies of the field, how they grow, so that you hear the sound of the river flowing fast and full as it is, so that you catch the scent of the sea when the wind is just right; feeling the warmth in a loved one's touch, hearing the love (or hurt, or joy) in their voice. To be thankful for the miracles of life we must be awake enough to see them; to be thankful for gifts given we must be aware they have been received. To be awake, to be aware, to be alive.

Quite some time ago a friend gave me an anonymous quotation that has inspired me for years:

"You are alive. It needn't have been so. It wasn't so once, and it will not be so forever. But it is so now. And what is it like: to be alive in this maybe one place of all places anywhere where life is? Live a day of it and see. Take any day and be alive in it. Nobody claims that it will be entirely painless, but no matter. It is your birthday, and there are many presents to open. The world is to open."

And so we're back to writing those "thank you" notes for all these gifts, and we're faced with the difficult task of really saying "thank you" from the depths of our souls — of humbling ourselves, of admitting that we cannot and have not done it alone, that there are holes in our lives which we cannot fill — and it's really not so surprising that only one out of ten returned to say "thanks." Living a life of gratitude is not easy, but it is absolutely essential for living a full life and a life of joy. As one of my predecessors in this pulpit, Peter Fleck, famously noted, the Pilgrims knew this truth—he wrote, "the pilgrims were not thankful that they survived their first winter; they survived their first winter because they were thankful." The Wompanoag peoples with whom the first Thanksgiving was celebrated knew this Truth too, and it sings in the suttras of the Buddhists, and flows from the pages of centuries of poets. The Samaritan leper who came back knew it, too. And as we look ahead to Thanksgiving Day this Thursday it brings us back to that grace:

*For what we are about to receive — and for all we have received already — may we be truly thankful.*

May we be truly thankful.

Amen

**Final Words:** “Appreciation can make a day, even change a life. Your willingness to put it into words is all that is necessary.” ~ *Margaret Cousins*