

## ***Thanksgiving Eve*** **November 26, 2008**

We all know the story of the ten lepers that we just heard, but I'd like to use it today as a way into the whole business of Thanksgiving, and giving thanks, and stuff like that.

Now, if that Gospel story were being reported by George Gallup, it would probably read like this: "Recent poll shows nine out of ten Episcopalians are ungrateful." I won't say that this is statistically accurate for our church; but I do know from experience and from my own behavior and observation of others, that we tend to be forgetful about thanksgiving. We just tend to overlook it. It's certainly true that we're much better at asking. If you look at our Gospel, one hundred percent of the lepers were good at asking, right? We're all good at asking, I want, I need, give to me, please let me have. We're very good at that.

But we are forgetful and sometimes we're unaware of gifts. I don't think we're ungrateful: I think the reason that sometimes we fail to thank God is that the gifts itself gets in the way of doing that.

This is really very important. We let the gift get between us and the giver. The gift consumes us, it draws our attention away. It's the scope and the glory of what we receive that prevents us from being thankful.

Now, behind this, I think, is our failure carefully to think through the meaning of gifts. What is a gift? First of all, a gift isn't really, or primarily, a way of getting things or of having things—instead, a gift is, at its heart, a way of expressing a relationship.

Isn't the reason behind giving a gift really a desire to express a relationship? After all, if we really don't care about the relationship, then we don't care what we give. Lots of times we feel we've got to give something because that's expected. No big deal here. But when you really want to give a gift, it's to someone you care about. When that happens, you take the time to think about what is appropriate, because that gift is somehow going to express your relationship. We want something that will go from heart to heart.

Now, with just a little reflection it's pretty clear that the best, the purest, expressions of giving come from children. If you think about how children give gifts, it's easy to see that they are tangible attempt to draw us closer together and to express relationships. By some small gift a child attempts to show us that they love us. These are usually gifts of absolutely no monetary value. Sometimes you don't even want them and so you skip right pass the gifts to the giver. You hug the kid.

Think about things you've gotten from children, some untidy piece of art with "I love you" on the bottom, painfully written. It's not valuable; it doesn't fit in with any decor except your refrigerator door; but you hang it up proudly because it's a symbol of love, because it goes immediately from heart to heart. The gift itself doesn't intrude between the meaning the giver wants to give and the receiver—the meaning comes through immediately. The meaning of the gift, of course, is "I love you."

Now, that's what gifts are meant to do. But imagine what you would do if your child, instead of a crude hand-made cut out card, gave you a brand new Lexus (or whatever your dream possession might be). I guarantee if my kid had done that, it would have changed the whole dynamic.

I'd be focused on the Lexus. And it would be a snap to forget the love that was behind it. This is how the gifts themselves get in the way between the giver and the receiver and how we can focus on the gifts, and lose their true meaning. When a child give a gift, how do you respond? You hug the child, you don't "ooh and aah" all that much over the gift. If the gift were a Lexus, I'd have "oohed and aahed" over the car and easily left the person out.

With so many of the gifts we receive, especially gifts from God, their true meaning is lost because we focus our thanksgiving on the gift and not on the giver. When that happens, we can quickly forget both the giver and why the gift is given.

Now, let's go back to our story of the ten lepers. Here they are, ten of them, all asking to be healed. Then they're on their way to Jerusalem to receive a sign from the priest. Suddenly they realize they are healed. Can you imagine that the nine who kept going into their new lives didn't have gratitude? That's unimaginable. I mean, if you were just healed of a disease that had cut you off from a community, a disease that made you as good as dead, and you discovered that you were well, would you not have said "Thank you, thank you, thank you"? Of course, you would! You'd have felt such relief and such gratitude, you'd have had overflowed. At the same time, they were using that gift, starting new lives.

But that's not what Jesus is talking about here—not the feeling of thankfulness for the gift, but that thankfulness expressed toward the giver.

What the tenth leper received by the act of faith, you see, was a relationship with God. After all, the healing was mainly a sign that he was related to God.

The other nine missed that. They got the gift, but they did not get the heart of the gift, the thing the gift signified—namely a relationship with God. They didn't find that. In the same way, any time in our thanksgiving we focus on the gift and not the giver, we miss the purpose of the gift. It goes right by us. Sure, we're thankful, but we lose the meaning.

Of course, this is all about Thanksgiving Day tomorrow and what it can mean and do. And it's really a way to remind us all that the sacramental meaning of creation, and of all that we have, is at its most important level an invitation to establish a relationship with God. So, when we do not thank *him* for the all the gifts God offers, then we have not received all that the these gifts have to give us—a relationship with God. Gifts and giving, that's what creation really about, and what Thanksgiving can be about.

George Herbert wrote a simple poem called, *Our Prayer*, it says: "Thou has given so much to me, give one thing more, a grateful heart. Not thankful when it pleaseth me, as if Thy blessings had spare days, but such a heart whose pulse may be Thy praise."

God is the source of all that we have been given; and Thanksgiving can remind us that these gifts from God are sacramental means for having a relationship with Him; so our response of gratitude needs to be oriented to the giver, toward God Himself, and not the just to the gifts. Otherwise, the gifts get in the way, and we can miss the main point.