

Gratitude: A Matter of Perspective

Deuteronomy 8:6-18 & 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church

1001 W Colfax Ave., South Bend, Indiana 46616

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Deuteronomy 8:6-18 (NIV)

⁶ Observe the commands of the LORD your God, walking in his ways and revering him. ⁷ For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land — a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and hills; ⁸ a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; ⁹ a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills. ¹⁰ When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you.

¹¹ Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. ¹² Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, ¹³ and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, ¹⁴ then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

¹⁵ He led you through the vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. ¹⁶ He gave you manna to eat in the desert, something your fathers had never known, to humble and to test you so that in the end it might go well with you.

¹⁷ You may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” ¹⁸ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today.

2 Corinthians 9:6-15 (NIV)

⁶ Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷ Each [person] should give what [they have] decided in [their] heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. ⁹ As it is written: “He has scattered abroad His gifts to the poor; His righteousness endures forever.”

¹⁰ Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. ¹² This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³ Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, [people] will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of

Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. ¹⁴ And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. ¹⁵ Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!

Gratitude: A Matter of Perspective

It was the day after Thanksgiving. A woman caught her husband weighing himself on the scale and as he did this he was sucking in his stomach. “That won’t help you, Fred,” the woman said. “You know that, don’t you?” “Oh it helps a lot,” Fred replied. “It’s the only way I can see the numbers!” That would have been me last Thanksgiving before I began the Dean Ornish Heart Disease Reversal Program last Spring.

I hope you’re ready for Thanksgiving — and not just for the turkey and all the trimmings. Giving thanks is important to a successful life. A growing body of research is indicating that a sense of gratitude is vital if we are to be happy and whole persons. Of course, different people are thankful for different things.

One mom was outside one morning shoveling her driveway. She stopped to wave hello to her neighbor. He asked her why her husband wasn’t out there helping her with that chore. She explained that one of them had to stay inside to take care of the children, so they drew straws to see who would go out and shovel. “Sorry about your bad luck,” the neighbor said. The woman smiled as she looked up from her shoveling and said, “Don’t be sorry. I won!” Those of you who are parents of young children understand.

We are each thankful for different things. For some men, Thanksgiving is all about football. You remember what Erma Bombeck said about Thanksgiving. She said, “Thanksgiving dinners take eighteen hours to prepare. They are consumed in twelve minutes.” Then she added, “Half-times take twelve minutes. This is not a coincidence.”

By the way, believe it or not, Ms. Bombeck was right about the length of half-times in National Football League games. They may seem longer than that, but NFL half-times officially take 12 minutes. College half-times are more like 20 minutes. Of course this does not apply to special occasions like the Super Bowl or when they have special ceremonies or celebrities at half-time. But, if football is your thing, you will have something to do on Thanksgiving Day. Get ready for football.

This time of year reminds me of one of my favorite stories. Thanksgiving Day was approaching and the family had received a Thanksgiving card with a painting of a pilgrim family on their way to church.

Grandma showed the card to her small grandchildren and added this observation: “The Pilgrim children liked to go to church with their mothers and fathers.” “Oh yeah?” her young grandson replied, “So why is their dad carrying that rifle?” Well, I hope that our children don’t have to be threatened in order to get them to church. I hope they enjoy their friends here and their teachers.

The Thanksgiving story that most makes me cringe is one that broadcaster Paul Harvey told years ago. According to this story, the Butterball Turkey Company set up a hotline to answer consumer questions about preparing holiday turkeys. One woman called in to inquire about cooking a turkey that had been in her freezer for 23 years.

The operator told her it might be safe if the freezer had been kept below 0 degrees the entire time. But the operator warned the woman that, even if it were safe, the flavor had probably deteriorated, and said she wouldn't recommend eating it. The caller replied, "That's what we thought." Then she added, "We'll just give it to the church." If that doesn't make you laugh, it should make you cry.

If I were to choose a text that is probably the classic text for Thanksgiving Day, it would be our Old Testament reading for today from the book of Deuteronomy. Moses is addressing the Children of Israel in the wilderness. They are between the exodus from Egypt and their entrance into the Promised Land. That is the setting in which Moses speaks these words that are just as apropos for you and me today as they were for Israel 3000 years ago:

"For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land — a land with brooks, streams, and deep springs gushing out into the valleys and hills; a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills.

"When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land He has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe His commands, His laws and His decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery..."

Can you imagine? Moses is warning the people that after they have built nice homes and have plenty to eat and nice clothes to wear, and beautiful SUVs in the driveway, that they will grow proud and think they did it all themselves. Self-made men and women.

Of course, that could never happen to us, could it? Could we forget that just being born in this prosperous and free land is worth 50 points on an entitlement scale; having two parents who love you is worth another 20 points; having a good education — which often depends on what community you live in — is worth another 10 points. Being born with a sound mind and a sound body is worth at least another 10 points, and having a little bit of luck along the way is worth another 5 points.

That's 95 points! Surely we can't believe we did it all ourselves, can we? This passage surely isn't for us, is it? "Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe His commands, His laws and His decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery..."

ONE THING THAT MANY OBSERVERS HAVE NOTED IS THAT BEING AFFLUENT DOESN'T NECESSARILY MAKE YOU GRATEFUL.

Moses knew that, and many wise people have observed it since. Some of the unhappiest people in this world live in the most magnificent mansions. Often times having great wealth doesn't make you happy. Rather it causes you to feel entitled and causes you to crave more.

That's a point that author Bob Russell makes in his book, *Jesus, Lord of Your Personality*. He writes, "Have you had a taste of the best this world has to offer? You went to Hawaii once on vacation, so now it's harder for you to enjoy the state park. You've eaten a steak at Ruth Chris, so it's harder to be thankful for a meal at Ponderosa. You've driven a Jaguar, so now you can't be as content with your used Chevrolet. You've cheered for a national champion, so now it's difficult to be grateful when your team has a good season, but doesn't take home the title..."

"Generally speaking, the more we have, the less grateful we are," writes Bob Russell. "It should be the opposite; the more we have, the more thankful we should be. But it usually doesn't work that way, does it? It is a rare person who, when his cup frequently runs over, can give thanks to God instead of complaining about the limited size of his mug!"

I believe that most of us can see that. We have an expression for it: "Money can't buy — what?" That's right. "Happiness."

OFTEN IT IS THE PERSON WHO HAS HAD SOMETHING SIGNIFICANT TAKEN AWAY FROM THEM WHO LEARNS THE LESSON OF GRATITUDE.

Kent Crockett, in his book with the title *I Once Was Blind, But Now I Squint*, tells about his father who had to undergo radiation treatments for throat cancer. "The therapy damaged his taste buds so that he couldn't taste food. His inability to enjoy a meal made eating a dreaded duty. The doctors told him his taste might return after the treatments were finished, but no one could say for certain.

"Weeks passed, then months. Every meal became a forced feeding to keep him alive. After eating flavorless food for over a year, he sat down for dinner one evening. Reluctantly, he forced the fork inside his mouth and discovered that his taste had returned. What most people would call a bland dinner became the best meal he had eaten in his life."

"Through losing his taste and then regaining it, [his] father learned to relish each morsel as never before. He became thankful for the ability to taste because he now had a reference point. He would never forget what it was like to eat tasteless food.

"You don't have to lose something in order to be thankful," says Crockett. "You can develop a 'taste' for your blessings by simply realizing what life would be like without them."

Think about some of the blessings you enjoy. Now imagine they were taken from you. Then they were restored. Can you imagine how grateful you would be?

Sir John Templeton, the billionaire investor, was once asked, “What is the secret of wealth.” Without hesitation Templeton said, “Gratitude.” He went on to say, “If you’re not grateful, you’re not rich — no matter how much you have.”

THIS IS TO SAY THAT GRATITUDE IS A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE.

A wise pastor once noted, “When Robinson Crusoe was wrecked on his lonely island he drew up in two columns what he called the evil and the good. He was cast on a desolate island, but he was still alive — not drowned like all his crewmates. He had no clothes, but he was in a hot climate where he did not need them. He was apart from human society, but he was not starving. He was without any means of defense, but he saw no wild beasts. He had no one to whom he could speak, but God had sent the ship so near the shore that he could get out of it all the things necessary for his basic wants.”

Robinson Crusoe could be grateful even though he assumed he was on a deserted isle. As the old Gospel tune goes, “Count your many blessings, name them one by one; count your many blessings see what God has done...” And that is the source of lasting happiness.

The words of Moses are just as apropos for you and me today as they were for Israel more than 3000 years ago. Affluence doesn’t make you grateful. It is sometimes the people who have lost everything but life itself who are the most grateful. Moses sums up his message to the Hebrew people, and to us, like this: “But remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms His covenant, which He swore to your ancestors, as it is today.”

Poet Rudyard Kipling obviously had this scripture in mind when he wrote his famous poem, *Recessional*: “Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet, “Lest we forget — lest we forget!”

That’s the message we need to take with us as we go back to our nice homes and wonderful families and as we feast on the Thanksgiving turkey: “Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet, “Lest we forget — lest we forget!” Amen.

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