

November 20, 2011
The Do's And Don'ts Of Giving Thanks
Luke 17:11-19
Rev. Jean Smith

Today's scripture lesson is about the importance of giving thanks. Giving thanks is not something that comes natural. It's not an ability we are born with. It's something we must learn to do. For most of the really important things in life, the most powerful teachers are our parents. Chances are, if we have learned the art of saying thanks, it's because our parents taught us how to do it and the most powerful way they do that is by modeling it for us. This became very clear for me as I watched my mother lose my father after 57 years of marriage. When the news came that my father had passed, I jumped in the car and drove to North Carolina to be with my mother. The whole way there I kept thinking, I have to help my mother get through this. I have to be strong for her.

As I watched my mother go through that time I learned something very important from her. I learned that **the act of giving thanks can turn your grieving into celebration**. I watched as people reached out to her. I watched as friends and neighbors came by the house to express their condolences, bringing their favorite casseroles and yummy homemade pies. I watched the cards come, one after the other from family and friends all over the country. I watched as my mother greeted people at the funeral home and I watched as her church family filled the sanctuary with over 300 people for the service. I watched as my mother in the days that followed busy herself reading all the cards that came and trying her best to eat the food that had been given so it wouldn't go to waste. She was so concerned that it not go to waste. She had grown up one of nine children in the back hills of North Carolina, the daughter of a farmer who was so poor, he had to rent the fields he farmed. And that man died when my mother was only 3 years old, leaving my grandmother alone with nine children. My mother knew what it was to go without and she didn't want to see anything wasted.

I watched as my mother spent hours each day writing personal notes of thanks to those who sent cards, food, flowerers and memorial gifts to my father's favorite charities. I watched as my mother's grieving turned to celebration through the act of giving thanks. She gave thanks for all the kind words and generous donations. She gave thanks for the man who had been her partner in life for all those years. I watched my mother get through those days, which turned into weeks and now years since my father's death. She turned her grieving into celebration through the act of giving thanks.

Today I am still watching my mother turn her grieving into celebration through the act of giving thanks. This past August she had to give up her home and the beloved state of North Carolina, where she was born and raised, where she spent 20 years of retirement with her husband before his death. She is now living closer to me so that I can watch over her and help her through the simple tasks of living that have become too much for her. I continue to watch my mother turn her grieving into celebration through the act of giving thanks.

In our scripture lesson for today we see that this art of giving thanks is not something that comes natural. We see that only one came back. Only one came back to give thanks for the healing he had received. All the others had experienced the same suffering, the same dreaded disease that had relegated them to live separated from family and friends as outcasts and untouchables. They were unclean, unworthy to live with the rest of society because of their disease. Now they were cleansed and healed and as soon as they were examined by the priest they could be reinstated and citizens in good standing within the community. Only one came back. Only one realized the art of giving thanks that turns grieving and pain into celebration and gladness.

There is most certainly an art to giving thanks. It is something we must learn to do, like writing thank you notes. Did you know there is an art to writing thank you notes? There is a certain etiquette to writing them, especially if you are from the deep South. There are certain guidelines for giving thanks that stand the test of time. Here's an excerpt from an article written in a Mississippi newspaper back in the early 1900's.

"In regard to thank-you notes, it is best to recognize a gift with an immediate note of thanks. Unlike arriving at a party, there is no such thing as being fashionably late with thank-you notes. Thank-you notes should be sent quickly and should smell of sincerity. Of course there are a few don'ts in regard to thank-you notes. Do not use a form written correspondence, one uniformed thank you note for every giver. This has become quiet fashionable in Atlanta and Nashville; but considering that each has prostituted its southern heritage, this is not entirely unexpected. A form thank-you not will not do the trick in Vicksburg, Mobile, or Memphis. Further, be mindful not to show partiality in gratitude or enthusiasm when writing your notes. Many of your guests will be from the same family and is highly likely, I would imagine probable, that thank-you notes will be shared and compared over the phone or over a cocktail."

While that all may sound a bit snooty to our modern sensibilities, and even make us chuckle, it holds some very good advice. There is a certain etiquette, which must be followed in giving thanks to others if you want to do it well, and there is also a certain etiquette, if you will, in giving thanks to God. There are some do's and don'ts when giving thanks. Here is what I have noticed about truly thankful people:

FIRST, THANKFUL PEOPLE DON'T DELAY GIVING THANKS. They don't put it off. The passage says, *"As they went, they were healed. One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice."*—Luke 17:14b -15 As soon as the leper realized he was healed, he turned around and ran back to Jesus to thank him. Our giving thanks is to be done as soon as possible. The one who did the giving is looking for a response. They want to know you liked it. The Lord is no different in this. He takes great delight in seeing you enjoy his blessings, seeing you enjoy his healing and his help. Do not withhold your thanksgiving from the Lord. Let it flow from a heart freshly aware of what has been given. Don't delay giving thanks.

SECOND, THANKFUL PEOPLE DON'T JUST GO THROUGH THE MOTIONS. They are sincere. As you give thanks, use your own words, not some form letter to God. Let your prayers of thanks come from your heart. Don't hold back when thanking God. The passage says the leper praised God, *"in a loud voice."* He didn't hold his emotions back. He let them out. The passages says, *"He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him..."*—Luke 17:16 This was an act of humility. He humbled himself before the Lord. He surrendered himself to the Lord. He acknowledged his complete dependence on the mercy and grace of the Lord. He held nothing back from the Lord. That's the way we are to offer our thanks to the Lord. It is to be an act of self-offering, of giving ourselves to the Lord.

THIRD, THANKFUL PEOPLE DON'T COMPLAIN. They rejoice. They stay positive and focus completely on the good gift that has been given and they rejoice. Can you imagine if the leper had said, "Lord, what took you so long? I've been suffering for years in that leper colony. Not only have I suffered physically, but I've been cut off from all my family and friends." Or imagine if he had pulled out a list of things he wanted the Lord to do for him now that he saw the Lord's power. "Lord, I was thinking about opening up a healing clinic and I was wondering if you'd like to go in on it with me. He's a contract. Just sign on the bottom line."

Just as God hears our words of thanksgiving, he also hears our complaints. He knows when we are counting our blessings and when we are counting our neighbor's blessings. Every time we complain about our health, what we have or don't have, our jobs, our missed opportunities, we are demonstrating our unhappiness with God's provisions. Thankful people don't complain, they rejoice. They find a reason, even in the midst of a difficult situation, to be thankful. Matthew Henry was a Presbyterian minister and Bible teacher of the 1600's. He wrote a commentary on every book of the Bible. His work is cherished still by evangelical pastors and serious students of the Bible. One day he had the unfortunate experience of being robbed. The thieves attacked him and beat him up badly before taking everything of value that he had with him. Later that evening, he wrote in his diary these words: *"I am very thankful that during these years I have never been robbed before. Also, even though they took my money, they didn't take my life. Although they took all I had, it was not much. Finally, I am grateful that it was I who was robbed, not I who did the robbing."* Matthew Henry is an example of a truly thankful person. Even in the midst of pain and suffering, he didn't complain, but rather focused on things he was thankful for and that turned his sorrow into rejoicing. He is a marvelous example of someone who refused to complain and instead found reasons to give thanks. He saw his situation as a blessing rather than a curse.

FOURTH, THANKFUL PEOPLE DON'T HOARD. They give generously. Hoarding is the act of collecting without any interest in sharing. People often hoard because they are prideful. Pride kills a person's ability to be thankful, but the humbled heart is the soil in which thanksgiving grows and blossoms, until it produces the fruit of generosity. A proud person is seldom a grateful person, for they never think they get as much as they deserve. Show me a generous person and I will show you a grateful person.

In the Hebrew language, the word for "thanksgiving" is the same word for "confession" and "praise." It is the word "*towdah*" and it literally means "*to extend an open hand to God in thanksgiving, or praise or confession.*" "Towdah" is a hand lifted to God, an open hand raised up to God - open to give and to receive. It is open to give thanks to God for his many blessings and it is open to receive from God the blessings he desires to give. When we extend our open hand to God in an act of "towdah" we are offering all that we are to him and at the same time God is offering himself to us. As we offer all that we are to God, he says, "All that I am is yours." But when our hands are closed in an act of hoarding, there can be no thanksgiving.

FIFTH, THANKFUL PEOPLE DON'T FORGET. They remember. They intentionally remind themselves of why they are thankful. You see, we are by nature forgetful people. We tend to be caught up in the present or always looking forward to the future. We easily forget what others have done for us in the past and we even forget what God has done for us in the past. Ask us what we want for the future and we can rattle it off. Ask what we are thankful for in the past and we have to stop and really think about it. Some of us are carrying heavy burdens right now and that makes it difficult to recall the joyous times we once enjoyed. Maybe money is really tight for you this year, making it hard for you to remember how God has always provided for you in the past. Maybe you'll be going through Thanksgiving without a loved one who once shared your table and you are finding it very difficult to give thanks. By God's grace, may you be able to remember how you sat year after year with your feet under the same Thanksgiving table. And may those memories give you reason to give thanks. For in the act of giving thanks, God turns your sorrow into joy and gives himself to you.

Between the years of 1618 and 1638, much of Europe was devastated by the Thirty Years War. Germany was all but destroyed by the fighting. The unwelcome companions of war, which are plagues and famine, swept across that country. The population dropped from 16 million to 6 million before the war was finally over. In the midst of all the death and destruction, a Lutheran pastor by the name of Martin Rinkart, continued to call his congregation to give thanks. In 1637, just a year before the end of the war, Rinkart's home town of Eilenburg was under siege and a great plague swept from house to house. More than 8,000 people died. Rinkart lost his wife to the deadly plague. Soon he was the only pastor left in the city. He performed between 40 and 50 funerals a day. Yet in the midst of that horror, Rinkart wrote would become one of the great hymns of the church. His ability to give thanks in the midst of his sorrow turned his sadness into rejoicing, his pain into gladness. It will do the same for you as well.

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I would like to close with the words to Rinkart's hymn.

Now Thank we all our God.

Now thank we all our God, with hearts and hands and voices.
Who wondrous things hath done, in whom His world rejoices.
Who, from our mother's arms, hath blessed us on our way;
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God, through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts, and blessed peace to cheer us,
And keep us in His grace, and guide us when perplexed;
And free us from all ills, in this world and the next.

All praise and thanks to God, the Father now be given.
The Son, and Him who reigns, with them in highest heaven;
The one eternal God, whom earth and heaven adore;
For thus it was, is now, and shall be ever more.