

Be Grateful Sunday, 11/22/20

I Googled “Traditional Thanksgiving Dinner” as an image search, and this is what appeared. That might be someone’s traditional thanksgiving dinner, but it’s not mine. I spy a bowl of brussels sprouts behind the wine glass, and that sure doesn’t belong there. And the dish behind and to the left of the brussels sprouts, at the top center of the image? I have no idea what that is. That might be sweet potatoes in the upper right corner, but it doesn’t look like they’ve been mashed and covered with brown sugar and pecans and marshmallows. And what’s with the food in the foreground? I like asparagus, but on Thanksgiving Day I want the green bean casserole with onion ring pieces on top. And the whole cranberries? If it’s not cranberry jelly fresh from the can and cut into slices, then it’s just not Thanksgiving dinner. And don’t get me started on those weird looking rolls in the lower right-hand corner. I want the soft, squishy buns with the flour dusted on top and a big slab of butter. And I see the gravy pitcher at the far left, but where are the mashed potatoes?

How about you? What’s your idea of a traditional Thanksgiving dinner? Are you going to have one this year? And if so, who are you going to gather together with around the table at a time the Minnesota Department of Health is practically begging us not to share indoor gatherings with friends and family? Is it the food that makes it traditional, the place you eat it, the people you share it with, or might it also have to do with our attitude? The pandemic can mess with our meal plans, but does it have to rob us of the grateful hearts that we offer to God whenever we gather around a table?

I normally celebrate Thanksgiving at my mom’s place with as many of my family who can be there. This year, we’ll be gathering by Zoom. We’ll still eat many of the foods that are traditional for my family, and like many of you, we’ll share the tradition of thanking God for all that we’re grateful for- our family, our health, our jobs, our homes, and of course the delicious dinner, even if we can’t share it in person. But every year that we go through the annual Thanksgiving rituals, I wonder. Is it possible that we were created and called to give thanks more often than just once a year? Is it possible that God’s idea of thanksgiving goes quite a bit beyond the annual turkey and cranberries and all the other good comforts we enjoy at this time of the year? God wants our lives are to be saturated in thanksgiving, not just gratitude for the creature comforts that we enjoy, but a grateful joy that comes from

following and serving the risen Christ.

How's your gratitude level this year, as we prepare for yet another unique event in the longest year in history? If you had to rate your gratitude, on a scale from one to ten, would you be a "one," I'm disappointed with life and angry with God; or a "ten," I'm grateful to be alive and thankful to God for another day? It's OK to be honest. You can share that with everybody or somebody if you like, or simply reflect on that privately. As we prepare to consecrate our promises of giving and our plans for serving in 2021, we need to remember that stewardship begins with receiving God's gifts gratefully.

If you had to guess which parts of the Bible had the most encouragements to gratitude and thanksgiving, what would you guess? The Psalms contain many exuberant exhortations to thanksgiving, especially Psalm 100. The image of entering God's gates with thanksgiving is supposed to bring to mind a noisy, joyful parade of people, singing praises to God, entering Jerusalem as they prepare to worship God at the Temple. Do you remember the Apostle Paul telling us last week to "revel" in God? Entering God's gates should be a time of revelry. We can certainly give thanks to God with reverent and somber tones, but so often the Bible describes giving thanks as noisy jubilation. Until we can have parades again, as well as noisy, crowded, indoor worship, we can be thankful for the kind of worship we've enjoyed for so many years and we can think of new ways to make a joyful noise as we give thanks to God.

Of course, giving thanks starts with having a heart of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving, Paul writes, is something that overflows from our hearts as we grow in our rootedness in Jesus. He writes in Colossians 2:7, "Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness."¹ And in Ephesians 5, Paul also points to our hearts, writing, "[B]e filled with the Holy Spirit, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, and making music to the Lord in your hearts."² In other words, thankfulness is actually a fruit of the Holy Spirit that takes root in our hearts and bears fruit in our lives.

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus demonstrates a profound lesson on gratitude

¹ Colossians 2:7. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

² Ephesians 5:18b-19. Ibid

involving the healing of ten lepers. It doesn't really matter what their particular affliction was. It certainly wasn't COVID-19, and this sermon really has nothing at all to do with the pandemic. As you listen to this short account from Luke, try to identify what's most surprising to you about it. I'm reading from chapter 17, beginning with verse 11, in the New Living Translation.

{Read Luke 17:11-19, NLT}

It's a simple enough account, right? What was surprising about it? For some hearing the narrative, they would have been surprised that Jesus had the power to heal. For some hearing the story, they would have been surprised that Jesus bothered to heal a foreigner, and a Samaritan at that. The Samaritan who was healed would certainly have been surprised by that. But for most of us hearing this account today, probably not for the first or even the tenth time, we're most surprised that only one of the ten men came back to thank Jesus. Jesus certainly seemed taken aback by that, and it's not difficult to see the simple lesson that we might take from that. If even people outside the church know to seek out God with gratitude, then certainly those who call themselves the Body of Christ ought to do at least as much.

But let's look at this from a slightly more unusual perspective. I'm honestly a bit surprised that even one of the ten came back to thank Jesus. But even more surprising to me is that Jesus healed all ten, most likely knowing full well that nine out of ten would never darken his door again. And bear in mind that this wasn't Jesus' first healing gig, so by now this was probably a familiar pattern for him: freely dispensing healing mercies despite knowing that the fruit of gratitude would be limited.

Wow, if you need proof that this man was the Son of God, look no further. How many of us are so filled with grace that we continue to pour out blessings on others in the absence of some clear expressions of gratitude? God does want our thanksgiving, because giving thanks brings us into relationship with God, but God's blessings aren't contingent on it. That's the very meaning of grace. Recognizing that we receive blessings from God that we haven't earned is a cornerstone of what it means to be grateful people in this season of Thanksgiving.

Let's return to our Thanksgiving dinners. Will yours look anything like this TV

dinner? Actually, that doesn't look half bad, really! Some of us will no doubt celebrate Thanksgiving in the same way that we always have, but many are choosing more cautious, distant approaches to sharing with friends and family this year. What we're going to eat, and who we're going to eat it with do matter, of course. Regardless of how your celebration may be changed, let one thing be true for all of us. Let's grow in our gratitude this year, a year when it's been so easy to find things to be disappointed by rather than grateful for. Let's thank God for our daily bread, the food that gives us the strength to get up and live each day, as well as the other kinds of daily bread, like the smile on the face of someone on a Zoom call, or the sound of a loved one's voice on the telephone. Let's thank God for the air in our lungs, something we never even think about until we're no longer able to breathe in and out with ease.

Regardless of what we eat, there's something deeper that all our Thanksgiving dinners can share in common. It may or may not be acknowledged out loud as we sit down to eat. Whether we prepare a meal, order out, or just showed up and eat, the Holy Spirit will be seated at the table with us, inviting us to thankfully remember all that God has done for us through the abundant grace of Jesus Christ. Even if you don't get the right kind of cranberries this year, or the mashed potatoes aren't as lumpy as you like them, look for the hand of God's provision in your meal and the lives of those you love, whether you're able to be with them in person, or you need to settle for something more distant this year.

Here's your homework for the week. Remember, I'm not asking you to do all of these things, but please do at least one of them to take a positive step forward in growing in being grateful.

- Write down three things that you're grateful for each day.
- Even better, don't keep those blessings to yourself, but share your expressions of gratitude with someone else.
- Be looking for the small things in life that add goodness, especially if those are things you tend to overlook.
- Practice overlooking flaws and imperfections in other people and your circumstances of life, choosing instead to dwell on what's beautiful and whole.

- And as always, if none of those things are right for you, then come up with some other creative way to grow in gratitude in a way that you haven't tried before.

Please take some time now to reflect on how you can grow in gratitude this week. If you like, you can share a comment or a prayer.



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