

In Philippians 4, Paul told the early Christians to give thanks to God “in everything,” in every situation....and that through giving thanks God would provide peace. In the Gospel lesson we heard today, Jesus healed ten lepers, giving them their lives back, and only one of those ten thought to return to Jesus to thank him. We may wag our fingers and shake our heads at the nine who didn't bother to thank Jesus, but if we're honest, it's likely that most of US don't do such a great job of thanking God for what God does for us, either. It's easy to read these scriptures; it's not so easy to let them change the way we live.

Grumbling or gratitude? I wake up in the morning, and will automatically grumble if I'm not careful. “Oh, is it already time to get up? I can barely move, because I had Toby – our 22 pound cat - on my feet all night. Oh, dear, I have so much to do today...!” Grumbling, I miss the fact that the day is a gift from God, offering me opportunities to trust God, to show love to others, to learn that God is with me, and to be thankful that I can move, have enough to eat, think, and that I have people who care about me in my world.... And this does not even scratch the surface of all the things for which I could thank God!

Folks have always stumbled when it comes to trusting, obeying and appreciating God! Adam and Eve decided to step over the one boundary God asked them to observe. Hundreds of years later, right after God delivered the Jews out of slavery in Egypt, the people lost sight of what God had done for them and instead got into grumbling: “We're thirsty; Moses just brought us out here just to die! We were better off being slaves in Egypt! We're tired of eating manna....” And when Moses was up on the mountain praying for many days, the people lost perspective and ended up making themselves a golden calf to worship, something they could see....

What is it about us, that we find it easier to grumble than to give thanks? I ride a bus into NYC a couple of times a month, and frequently find myself listening to some of the conversations around me. There are complaints about the government and the economy, of course, and stories about family members who didn't do right, and lots of grumbles about this show or that company or the treatment someone received in a store or a doctor's office.... I have heard only a couple of folks who expressed gratitude for something in their lives.

Sometimes it takes a crisis. After Hurricane Sandy struck, persons who were looking through rubble were devastated by their losses, but the common refrain was voiced, “We're so thankful that we are alive.” Neighbors showed care for one another, delivering water and food, helping each other with clean-ups. Others came from great distances to help. In spite of the hardships, there has been a lot of thanksgiving.

Long ago Fulton Oursler told of his old nurse, who had been born a slave on the eastern shore of Maryland and who had attended the birth of his mother as well as his birth. She taught Fulton a lasting lesson about giving thanks and finding contentment: "I remember her as she sat at the kitchen table in our house; the hard, old gnarled hands folded across her starched apron, the glistening eyes, and the husky old whispering voice, saying, "Much obliged, Lord, for my vittles." I asked her, "Anna, what's a vittle?" She said, "It's what I've got to eat and drink, that's

vittles." "But you'd get your vittles whether you thanked the Lord or not," I said. She replied, "Sure, but it makes everything taste better to be thankful." (Several versions on the Internet)

This week our nation will make a big deal of families getting together and eating too much as we try to touch a deep sense of appreciation for what we have. Being thankful seems to be a door through which we let God's peace into our hearts. Seriously. When we count our blessings and voice them, we remind ourselves that a lot of things had to come together just right to let us be where we are right now, even if we're having a hard time of it. And life really does "taste better" when we realize that God is with us and that even if we don't have what we wish we had, and maybe we do have some of what we wish we did not have, God is still right here with us, helping us get through. As we have said so many times in the affirmation of Faith, "God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God!" (UMC Hymnal # 883)

There came a time in Fulton Oursler's life when he went through "a long, dark night of the soul." He was in trouble, and sank into despair. But he later testified that the thing that kept him hanging on and finally brought him through his depression was the memory of old Anna and how she could always find something to be thankful for, whatever the circumstances. One memory that particularly challenged him and encouraged him to keep on keeping on was his recollection of the time Anna was dying. He, along with others, went to be with her. Recalling that day, he said, "I stood by Anna's bedside; she was in deep pain and her hands were knotted together in a desperate clutch. Poor old woman; what had she to be thankful for now? She opened her eyes and looked at us; her eyes lingered with mine. 'Much obliged, dear Lord,' she said, 'for such fine friends.'" Fulton Oursler said, "She never spoke again, except in my heart. But there she speaks every day. I'm much obliged to God for that." (From a sermon from pastorlife.com)

"In everything give thanks, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." (1 Thess. 5:18)
When we do not live out our thanksgiving, we become stagnant. There is an old story of a selfish man in the Far East who inherited a rice field. The first season the irrigation water ran through his field and made it productive and fruitful, then overflowed into a neighbor's field and gave him blessings as well. When the next season arrived, the selfish fool said to himself, "Why should I permit all the waters to flow through my field into his? Water is wealth, and I should keep it all for myself." He then built a dam which kept the water from flowing into his neighbor's fields. The result was that he had no crop at all that year, for the irrigation water brought blessing only as it flowed. When it became stagnant, it bred marsh and a swamp.

Probably the most powerful illustration I've come across about being thankful is that of the man who was robbed. He found himself thankful for three things: 1) That this was the first time he had ever been robbed; 2) That the robber demanded his possessions instead of his life; and 3) That he himself was being robbed and not committing robbery. Thanksgiving.

I served as Pastor of the Community Church of from 1988 through 1996. Dr. Miller was head of Trustees when I was hired, and I have to tell you that I was quite intimidated by him. He was an impressive man; he had been Superintendent of the Great Neck schools years before, and had even had his picture on the cover of Time magazine! Dr. Miller commanded respect, and

demanded it. When I arrived he ran the church with an iron hand; everybody either respected him or feared him.

Over the years, I learned to love Dr. Miller. Every Monday morning he would come into the church office and give me a critique of the day before. He would challenge my use of a word, or my pronunciation of it. And sometimes we would sit together and talk about what ministry meant. But the most meaningful time for me in all those eight years was the time John Miller came in, sat down, and told me that his favorite hymn was the one we will sing after this sermon, "God Will Take Care of You." This man who had accomplished so much in his life told me how he had learned early that he could trust that God would be there, that God would help him in the hard days, that when he could see only the things that made life impossible, God could show him a better path. There in my office, Dr. Miller sang, "Be not dismayed, what'ere the tide, God will take care of you." Every verse, sung by a man who in his 90 years had learned just how true these words are, spoke to me powerfully. Not only did the great Dr. Miller know that he needed God, he was willing to share this life-giving message with me. To this day, I remember and am thankful for his witness.

There is so much in life for which we need to give thanks. The memories we have of good times, the food and friends that sustain us, the challenges that force us to grow and adapt and look to God for help, just to name a few.... Each of us, even in the worst of our times, has more blessings than we can name.

As we give thanks and pray, God will help us find new attitudes, and we will even discover the peace of God, that peace that passes all understanding and every situation! God's love for each of us will never die. God's life for us will never run out. Each of us belongs to God. God is with us; we are not alone! Thanks be to God! Amen.

Benediction

4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! 5 Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
(New International Version)

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