

Entitled vs. Grateful

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service November 24, 2011: Thanksgiving Day.*

Based on Luke 17:11-19.

Thanksgiving Day homilies are to be light and short. Some turkeys still need to be basted and some—of another species, the human kind—need to be managed, as in “who gets to sit by the turkey this year?”; pecan pies, which have more calories per bite than any yet discovered food group and are surely to be found in heaven if such a place exists, have to be baked; cocktails are yet to be shaken and football games to be watched. Time is wasting.

So I shall get to the point.

As in all reductionist claims, the one I am about to make can be argued; but for today just take my word for it. There are two ways to live: one is the way of entitlement and one is the way of gratitude. The latter is much better.

Entitlement seems to be getting worse; I suspect it only seems that way. The story of these lepers suggests that it is an old problem. Nine of them took off without so much as a “have a nice day,” let alone falling before Jesus prostrate in thanksgiving. But whether new or old, it is all around us. Americans are accused of a particular propensity for feeling entitled. I guess that is true, but it is not really where I want to go today. Thanksgiving is our holiday, no day more audaciously American than this one. When I suggested that we sing “America the Beautiful” in the service this morning, as we shall do at the end, the staff was a little surprised. My patriotism is always tempered by my fear of unthinkingly connecting God and country, which can lead to disastrous results. Despite that, by the wonder of geological formation and evolution and all sorts of other factors, all but the worst curmudgeon has to admit that we are a lucky bunch. Even if the bloom is off the rose as some suggest about us, America is still a wonderful place to live; and on this uniquely American day one of the things for which I am thankful is the bounty and beauty of this land. But I am not entitled to it. As one creature created by God, I am like all of you its lucky denizen and steward not its entitled ruler.

That may be the clue in ferreting out and identifying the plague of entitlement—to recognize that we are so lucky, which is fundamentally different from assuming that we are “blessed.” When we say we are so “blessed,” as though God chose for us to have all that we have while choosing for others not to have such abundance, it is easy to begin to think—perhaps even subconsciously, actually unarguably subconsciously—that somehow we are entitled. We are lucky. There were more than ten lepers in the surrounds of Palestine; these ten were not any more loved by God than the thousands of others. They were lucky but only one of them realized the importance of being thankful.

I am pretty sure Jesus did not zap the other nine with a return of leprosy for being boorish. But they missed out on what it felt like to express profound gratitude. Gratitude truly is a state of mind, a way of being and responding to the world—whatever we call our good fortune. And when that fundamental need to express our thankfulness to God for things we think we understand and things we know we don't and when we fail to express our gratitude to one another, we miss the chance to be shaped more and more in the mode of gratitude, a mode of living that is inherently more joyful than one of entitlement. One way guarantees the surprise of grace, while the other guarantees disappointment.

I have acknowledged that this day is a secular one, a national holiday, shared by people of all faiths and no faiths. For us who have gathered, though, we desire to bring it to it the sanctity that for us comes from gathering at a table for an interaction with God we call Eucharist, a word which means “thanksgiving.” There is no place on earth like this table; it levels the world. Around it no one is better than, more or less worthy than, another; the rich and poor, the gay and straight, men and women as white as I am and as black and beautiful as the darkest ebony, and all shades in between, marvelously and individually unique and yet somehow here indistinguishable, all longing souls in search for God.

And at this moment of grace, and countless others like it around the world, so real that it can be touched and tasted, we know that all that is belongs to God and not to us, whether we are tenants or landlords, rich and famous or poor as church mice—and we are thankful, profoundly thankful—for this is the occasion of grace, pure and simple beyond that to which any of us is entitled but squarely at the center of God’s desire for us all.

Happy Thanksgiving to all!

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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