Thursday, November 23, 1978
THE RISKS OF THANKSGIVING
Luke 18:10-14

How can it be risky to be thankful? We've been taught from little on up to be thankful, and it's a good habit to acquire. What then are the risks?

1. First of all, most of us I suspect say "thank you" for what we consider unearned favors, for gifts, for things we hadn't expected, for surprises. Usually, we do not give thanks for things we have acquired by our own effort or for those things which we believe we own as a natural right. If we've worked for it and earned it, then we think the only person we owe thanks to is ourselves.

But here's where it gets risky! The Christian is commanded to give thanks "always and for everything..." "Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.' You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is God who gives you the power to get wealth," says the Old Testament in Deuteronomy.

God intends to remind us that everything which comes our way, however hard we have worked for it, filters through His fingers! Thanksgiving implies our sincere admission--that all is, finally of God. The risk of routine thanks is that we forget that.

There was a boy who was working in a garage with his father and this boy was complaining. He said, "I don't owe the world a thing. I didn't ask to be born." Well, it's true that no one asks to be born, but it does not automatically follow that we don't owe the world or God anything or that we should feel or act ungrateful. We have a tremendous debt to the past; to those who have gone before us; and to God, who we take for granted.

The boy in the garage had never taken a good look around him. Everything he enjoys doing is a free gift from the past. His tools, his machinery, his clothes, indeed his health itself — all were invented or developed or fortified by his ancestors. How many of us would survive at all without this tremendous inheritance we accept so easily and sometimes so thoughtlessly?

Consider again the brilliant people, the patient people, the dedicated people, who labored, often without reward, on projects both great and small, from the steam engine to the safety pin.

This boy in the garage would Be like a Beast in the forest if it were not for better persons than he; he would be unclad, unshod, ravaged by disease and riddled with misery.

Not anyone of us contributes more than one millionth of 1 percent to the accumulated knowledge and comfort we call civilization. The farmer inherits his tools from the wisdom of the past; the manufacturer depends upon the kind of brains that were more interested in progress than profit; the child in school benefits from untold hours of research and devotion.

The whole world is a gigantic legacy. Imagine having to start fresh each generation. Who would invent the wheel, devise the lever, construct the alphabet and multiplication tables? Who would discover the measle's vaccine or penicillin? I could not! Could you?

We owe gratitude to God, and we owe loyalty and thanksgiving to the past. We were born into a world where most of the basic elements were already waiting for us. We merely combine and

rearrange them for our pleasure or profit. Not more than a handful of us leaves anything for the future to use.

Ungratefulness or thankfulness only for what we think we haven't earned is a barbarous trait. It's risky! It's immature. On the other hand, thanksgiving to God for everything which comes our way, whether or not we think we've earned can change our lives for the better.

2. The second risk of thanksgiving is that the sincerity of our thanks is openly tested in the quantity and quality of our service. Do we live our lives in thankfulness? If our emphasis is on acquisition rather than letting go or relinquishment, then the sincerity of our thanks may be called into question.

No thanks from your lips or mine will rise higher than the nose unless it be coupled with a child-like willingness to use God's gifts as God requires. Sometimes we can talk too much about finding Jesus in our hearts, or having Jesus come into our hearts, without finding Him where he asks to be found — in the lives of others who need our help. Remember what Jesus said, "For I was hungry, and you gave me food, I was thirsty, and you gave me drink, I was a stranger, and you welcomed me, I was naked, and you clothed me, I was sick, and you visited me, I was in prison, and you came to me... as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me." The way we treat people is the way we treat God! Don't be awed by the chatterers about Thanksgiving — but rather join those who are finding Christ in others.

3. The third risk of thanksgiving is that it can lead us to admit our own insecurity. To thank God is to acknowledge that we haven't a leg to stand on in this broad, bright, and glorious world — except by divine gift. This is the opposite of our usual attitude of thinking that we actually own what we possess. Just because God's name is not on the deed to our homes or on the titles to our automobiles, does not mean that these are truly ours! The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof! The world and those who dwell therein! "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord."

All of us, of course, like to think of ourselves as self-sufficient. Thanksgiving, however, leads us to admit our own insecurity. That's a risk — it means we give our ultimate loyalty to God. That can lead to humility. That can lead to a fundamental re-orientation toward God and all of life.

4. And there is a fourth risk in thanksgiving. That risk is that our prayers of thanksgiving like the one the Pharisee gave in our scripture reading, will be the wrong kind of thanksgiving. He prayed — "God, I thank thee that I am not like other people, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector," and then he reminded God of his many virtues, "I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get."

In this prayer of this religious person, we can see why religious people often are unattractive and disliked. Instead of thanking God for God's help, religious people often begin to compare themselves favorably with everyone else. It is this widespread tendency to moral arrogance which is the most unattractive trait of many who call themselves religious.

So, thanksgiving can be risky. The wrong kind of thanksgiving prayer can lead us to false pride, and the belief that we've earned most of what we have, and we certainly deserve it.

On the other hand, the right kind of thanksgiving prayer can lead us to a deeper faith in God, and that's a risk too, because it means giving up many of our false gods.

In the parable which Jesus told about the two persons praying in the temple, he was telling us that the moral result of thanksgiving prayer ought to be a humbling and changing experience. Listen to your own prayers of thanksgiving. What do they tell you? What kind of living are they producing?