Thursday, November 25, 1982
BEING THANKFUL CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE
Luke 18:10-14

Sydney Harris, a newspaper columnist wrote in one of his columns about a young man who was working in a garage with his father and this young man was complaining. He said, “I don’t owe the world a thing. I didn’t ask to be born.” Harris then went on to comment — "It’s true that nobody asks to be born. But it does not follow that we don’t owe the world anything or that we therefore have the right to feel ungrateful. Life itself is a gift and we have a tremendous debt to the past; to those who have gone before us; and to God which we take for granted.”

Harris went on to say: “The young man in the garage had never taken a good look around him. Everything he enjoys doing is a free gift from the past and from others. His tools, his machinery, his clothes, indeed his health itself — all were invented or developed or fortified by his ancestors. How many of us could survive at all without this tremendous inheritance we accept so thoughtlessly. Consider the brilliant people, the patient people, the dedicated men and women who labored often without reward on projects both great and small, from the steam engine to the safety pin.”

The young man in the garage, as well as the rest of us, would be like a beast in the forest if it were not for better individuals than he. He would be unclad, unshod, ravaged by disease and riddled with misery. It has been said that not any one of us contributes more than one millionth of one 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 schoolboy or girl benefits from untold hours of research and devotion.”

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

So it is that we owe gratitude to God and beyond this, we owe loyalty and thanksgiving to others in the past and in the present. We were born into a world where most of the basic elements were already waiting for us. We merely combine and re-arrange them for our pleasure and profit. Not more than a handful of us in any century leaves something permanent for the future to use.

Ungratefulness is a barbarous trait. It is also the height of egocentricity. The young man in the garage is greedy for all advantages that ancient minds can confer upon him, but he will not pay homage to God or history or others. He did not ask to be born, but he is asking to die as a sullen savage, crouched in a motorcar he did not make, behind an engine he cannot control.

While ungratefulness is a barbarous trait, being thankful can change your life for the better. It’s part of the secret to finding life’s deepest meaning. Show me a grateful person and I will show you an individual who lives joyously and with a sense of God’s presence in his or her life.

Carlyle Marney, a Baptist minister who died a few years ago, once told of a girl who was born without arms and legs, but she was deeply loved by her family. Through special training, she developed a fantastic mind and spirit. When she was 20 years old, her brother brought home a friend from college, a philosophy major, a sophomore. Sophomores in college know

everything, challenge everything. After a few days in the home, he couldn't hold it anymore. He finally asked her, "Don't you wish that you had never been born? How on earth can you believe in a God of purpose and love when you look at yourself and see other people with arms and legs and the opportunities to move about and do and achieve? If I were you, I would curse whatever dealt me this." The young woman answered calmly, "I wouldn't have missed the change to be alive for anything in the world. I suppose what has been available to me seems very little compared to the opportunities many other people get, but when compared to not having existed at all, to never see, to never tasting, to never smelling, never hearing, never knowing the delights of reading and thinking and relating, I am overwhelmingly grateful for the opportunity to live that has been mine." What a contrast to the young man in the garage that Harris wrote about.

Being thankful can change our lives. Let me be more specific.

1. First of all, being thankful reminds us that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those that dwell therein." (Psalm 24) Without thankfulness, we tend to forget this and come to think that the earth is ours — that we deserve all the good things that have come to us and it's difficult to be thankful for what we think we deserve in the first place.

Then we often take it one step further and begin to believe that we have so much because we are better than those who have less. And so, our prayer of thanksgiving becomes like that of the Pharisee, "God, I thank thee that I am not like other people, extortioners, unjust, adulterers," and we go on to remind God of how good we really are, and then it's not a prayer of thanksgiving at all, but rather talking to ourselves.

Being honestly thankful, on the other hand, is to acknowledge that we have not earned what we have. Life is a gift. Love is a gift. That's why at the center of our faith and at the center of the Bible's message is the act of thanksgiving and praise.

William Law, one of the outstanding men of prayer of the 18th century wrote — "If anyone would tell you the shortest, surest way to all happiness and perfection, he must tell you to make a rule to yourself to thank and raise God for everything that happens to you." In other words, thanksgiving has nothing to do with abundance or shortages. It's a matter of our relationship to God.

Being thankful can change our lives because it is part of the key to the meaning of life itself as it reminds us of our dependence and relationship to God and to others.

2. Secondly, being thankful can change our lives because it delivers us from cynicism and anxiety. Someone has defined a cynic as an individual who knows the prices of everything, but the value of nothing." Being thankful tells us the value of things and of life itself. All comes from God and therein is its value. And more than that, being thankful and praising God can help us see value where we thought there was none.

Again, listen to William Law on this matter — "For it is certain that whatever seeming calamity happens to you, if you thank and praise God, you turn it into a blessing. The true saint is not the one who prays the most, or does the most fasting, or who is most eminent for temperance, or justice, but it is the one who is always thankful to God, who receives everything as an instance of God's goodness and who is always ready to praise God for it."

St. Paul is a good example. When in chains in prison, he wrote his letter of joy to the PHILIPPIANS. He practiced what he had written earlier to the Thessalonians: “Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances.”

Perhaps the most important distinction to note here is that we are to be thankful in all circumstances, rather than for all circumstances. There is a difference between giving thanks for something and giving thanks in something. It certainly would be impossible to be thankful for some towering tragedy; but it is not impossible for us to be thankful in it. Thus, some of the most sincere and strongest feelings of thanksgiving, some of the classic prayers have been uttered in the midst of great trouble, when to the outsider it would seem there was no cause for Thanksgiving.

Not only does being thankful save us from cynicism, but it also saves us anxiety and fear. Being anxious and full of worry is a weakness in many of us. But when we are in the habit of thanking God and also being grateful to our brothers and sisters in the human race, then we also come to trust that God will provide us with all things needful.

Someone has written, “Is not the dread of thirst when your well is full, the thirst that is unquenchable?” How true that is. Are there two words anywhere that evoke more foreboding than the words: “What if? What if?” We let our fears run ahead of us. The fear of need is in some ways worse than need itself in the present. Trust, however, which comes from being thankful, is the polar opposite of the fear of need. And we gain this trust through the regular act of thanksgiving. More than anything else, gratitude is a form of consciousness raising. It makes us aware, as perhaps never before, of how we are being and have been blessed.

I believe that our Pilgrim fathers and mothers understood this and that is why the thanksgiving festival was celebrated.

3. Thirdly, being thankful can change our lives for the better because thankfulness leads to humility. Thankfulness is an acknowledgement that we are not self-made individuals. It’s an acknowledgement that we live in an interdependent world. None of us could make it on our own. WE are all connected to each other. Our Pilgrim forefathers and mothers could not have survived those first few years without the help of the Indians as well as the help and support of each other.

The first winter the Pilgrims lived aboard the ship the Mayflower. Then in March 1621, an Abnaki Indian appeared in the village announcing, “I am Samoset.” He had learned some English from British seamen of Newfoundland. He brought with him Squanto, a local Patuxet Indian, whose people had been wiped out a few years before in a deadly epidemic that swept New England. Squanto became their interpreter and tutor. He taught them where to hunt and fish, where to gather clams and nuts and berries — in other words he taught them how to survive in this new country.

That fall, the first Thanksgiving was celebrated. It could just as easily have been a mourning festival. After all, every family had some member in grave. To lament all that had been lost would have been very logical and natural. Instead, it was a festival of thanksgiving. They focused on what was going for them, instead of what was going against them.

That band of people survived because of a trust in the future which was based on a deeper trust in God. Being thankful helped to change their lives.

Being thankful can change your life and mine for the better. It reminds us that the earth is the Lord’s, thanksgiving saves us from cynicism and anxiety, and thanksgiving brings us humility. Choosing to be grateful is a way of becoming aware of all that has been, all that is, and therefore all that shall be available. Surely goodness and mercy have followed us and will continue to be with us. Thanks be to God! Amen.