Sunday, November 24, 1985
THE ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE
Psalm 92:1-4; I Thessalonians 5:16-18; Luke 17:11-19

The story of the healing of the ten lepers from Luke's gospel has frequently been used as the text for thanksgiving sermons based on this story. Most of the sermon's dwell on the ingratitude of the nine lepers who did not come back to give thanks. Only one of the ten did return to Jesus with thanks, and he was a foreigner — a Samaritan. One speaker I heard kept returning to and repeating the question— "Where are the nine?" After twenty minutes of that, one knows where they are and why.

Luke's accent in the story is not that only one out of ten is grateful, but that the one who returns to express thanks is the Samaritan, the foreigner. Here is the truth that hurts. It is so often the stranger, the visitor, who sees, hears, enjoys, and responds in gratitude for the countless gifts to which familiarity has made us deaf and blind.

The visitor in the home plays with the children, the parent had hardly noticed between coming home and reading the evening paper or watching the news on television. The visitor gives thanks to the one who prepared the meal which the others of us have eaten a thousand times in silence. The visitor's presence prompts us to say grace at the table, a practice never consciously stopped, just unconsciously neglected. The visitor is shown places in our community which we ourselves are truly seeing for the first time.

Often it takes a visitor, a stranger, or a foreigner to rekindle in us the attitude of gratitude.

When we were little children our parents and others undoubtedly urged and taught us to say "Thank you" when something nice was given to us — a Halloween treat, a birthday gift, or a Christmas present. That marks a good beginning for developing the attitude of gratitude. However, too many of us grow up and still think of thanksgiving only in those terms. We think of it as an act, as being grateful for specific objects, events or people. Hopefully, we will grow in our thankfulness so that it becomes an attitude as well as an occasional act — a stance, an outlook on all of life.

That is what St. Paul was urging the Thessalonian Christians to do— "To give thanks in all circumstances," to develop an attitude of gratitude.

The other day I read about an older woman who spoke in a testimony service during a summer revival in her church. The minister asked all who would to stand up and tell of something for which they expressed gratitude. Finally, an old, old woman struggled to her feet and said, "I've got only two teeth in my mouth, one on the top and one on the bottom, but I thank God they meet."

What a contrast with another person I heard about. A fur-clad, elegantly dressed woman and her husband were on a long plane trip. The woman was going about from passenger to passenger grumbling about this and that inconvenience to anyone who would listen. She was a

down-beat gloom spreader. Embarrassed, her husband finally turned to his companion in the next seat and said, “My wife is a manufacturer. She manufactures unhappiness.”

The attitude of gratitude! Why have those who have had the most go right for them in life so many times turn out to be the ones most precise, irritable, petulant, chronically angry, and ungrateful?

If we cannot be grateful for what we have, what makes us think we could be grateful if we had what we do not have? Also, what if we had some of the things we do not want? The attitude of gratitude is not dependent on what we have or don’t have!

The attitude of gratitude! It is the mark of a truly religious and truly human person.

This morning let’s look first at some of the things which hinder us from developing an attitude of gratitude, and then we’ll look at some of the things that help us and what such an attitude can do for us, and third, some suggestions as to how to begin to develop an attitude of gratitude.

1. One of the most widespread impediments to developing an attitude of gratitude is the “Can you top this?” syndrome. We seem to think that only if this year is better than the last — then we will be thankful. Even though we might fiercely deny it, there seems to be for a great many of us, an invisible line below which it doesn’t occur to us to be grateful since we feel that all that’s below that line is our fair share, our right, what we deserve. It’s a certain minimum amount of good that we have coming to us. Then, if we get something extra, we’ll be thankful. In other words, gratitude is reserved for the overrun. When the blessings go over the top, exceed the line of what was expected.

2. A second barrier to developing an attitude of gratitude can be called the “Barrier of Ownership.” We’ve always had trouble with this one. One of the so-called church fathers, Cyprian, wrote way back in the third century of his contemporaries, “Their property held them in chains -chains which shackled their courage, choked their faith, hampered their judgment, and throttled their souls . . . They think of themselves as owners, whereas it is they rather who are owned, enslaved as they are to their own property, they are not masters of their money, but its slaves.” We even come to think that we are what we own!

That which we think we own, soon becomes that which we think we deserve, and we are not usually grateful for what we believe we deserve in the first place. The antedate is to see all we have as a gift which is ours to care for and be grateful for it.

3. A third block to developing an attitude of gratitude is that we tend to live on the surface of life and shallow people are never deeply thankful. People who live mostly on the surface of life are always finding trouble. There is always some little mistake that irritates them, some miscue, some little injustice, some discomfort, something which they say keeps them from “having fun.” And if you are not “having fun” why would you be grateful?

We need to make the distinction between “having fun” which is a surface thing, and “finding joy” which speaks of experiencing life in depth. In his book “The Art of Loving,” Erich Fromm

seems to make that distinction. He writes: “Having fun lies in the consuming and ‘taking in’ commodities, sights, food, drinks, people, lectures, movies; all are consumed, swallowed. The world is one great object for the appetite, a big apple, a big bottle; we are the sucklers, the eternally disappointed one. Our character is now geared to exchange and to receive, to barter and to consume+ everything (spiritual as well as materials objects) becomes an object of exchange and of consumption.”

We “have some fun” by having some of this and some of that. But it does end up quite different from finding some joy. Finding some joy comes from experiencing the depth of our relatedness to others and to God, the depth of our growth or excitement or change or hope through others. Finding joy means getting in deep, getting in over our head, getting carried away, what Jesus called “losing oneself.”

And this leads us directly to some of the things that can help us develop an attitude of gratitude, and what that attitude can do for us.

First, we begin to develop the attitude of gratitude when we realize that all of life is a gift. We do not earn life. The entire world is a gigantic legacy. Love is a gift, or else it is not love at all.

We all have a tremendous debt to the past; to those who have gone before us and to God. I marine 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 vaccine, the polio vaccine, or penicillin? I could not. Could you? We were born into a world where most of the basic elements were waiting for us. We merely combine and rearrange them for our pleasure and profit. Not more than a handful of us in any century leave something permanent for the future to use.

Recognizing that all of life is a gift, not only can lead to an attitude of gratitude, but with gratitude always comes humility. And all of us need more humility. I say that because those of us who are the most fortunate have managed to convince ourselves that this is because we are the natural beneficiaries of superior intelligence, diligence, foresight, energy, and morality. We convince ourselves that we have more because we deserve more — that God is rewarding us for being superior. And it is difficult to be either humble or thankful for what we think we deserve.

Secondly, we begin to develop the attitude of gratitude when we acknowledge that we are not independent — when we come to know deep down that we are connected to everything else that is. The connectedness of creation and the inter-dependence of creation is a message that needs to be heard repeatedly. It is one of the basic themes of our Christian faith.

The opposite of this is to emphasize independence- the belief that a single individual or a single nation can detach itself from everything else and still survive. In our view of the world, we have tended to see things in their separateness rather than with their connections, inter-dependence, and relationships.

So, for example, we have tended to see persons as black or white, or Indians, or Jews or Christians, or Moslems, or Americans or Russians. We tend to see people as adjectives rather

than nouns. And when we do this then we go on to make some people inferior and others superior, which sets up barriers to trust and forgiveness. If instead we are inter-dependent, then there is no one who is inferior or superior. We each have our own distinctive gifts and differences. We all need each other, and we are grateful for each other.

If we are to survive as a world, we must see ourselves as part of a unity which transcends all differences. The unity and connections have always been there — we have simply not always been aware of them.

Dr. Lewis Thomas put it this way in one of his essays— "We are not made up, as we have always supposed of only our own parts. We are shared, rented, occupied. At the interior of our cells, driving them, providing much of what we need to live, are the tiniest mitochondria, and in a strict sense they are not ours. They turn out to be separate creatures, very primitive bacteria, but without them we would not move a muscle, drum a finger, think a thought."

The more we become aware of our connectedness, the more we begin to develop an attitude of gratitude.

Here are two specific suggestions.

1. Begin to practice gratitude as a part of your everyday life. You can do this with short prayers of thanksgiving to God throughout each day. Just a thought of thankfulness is a prayer within itself. Someone has said that the true saint is not the one who prays the most, or does the most fasting, or who is the most eminent for temperance, or justice, but it is the one who is always thankful to God, and who receives everything as an instance of God's goodness and who is always ready to praise God for it.

Thankfulness is the practice of awareness of what you already have, rather than an emphasis on acquiring what you do not have.

2. Begin to practice the attitude of gratitude with other people.
Write notes of thankfulness to people simply telling them how much you appreciate them. William Stidger of the Boston School of Theology remembered the woman who had taught him in school, and from whom he had not heard in many years. Although it was decades ago, he recalled the way she had put the love of poetry in him.

So, he wrote a letter of thanks. No long after, he received this reply from her:

"My dear Willie: (He was thrilled by that salutation. He was over 50, bald, a professor and didn't think there was anyone left in the world who would call him Willie.) I cannot tell you how much your note meant to me. I am in my 80's, living alone in a small room, cooking my own meals, lonely, and like the last leaf of autumn, lingering behind. You will be interested to know that I taught school for 50 years and yours is the first note of appreciation I ever received. It came on a blue; freezing morning and it cheered me as nothing has in years..."

Willie wept.

The Psalmist wrote: “It is good to give thanks to God.” We do that not only in our prayers to God, but when we give thanks to others. It is good for them, and it is good for us. Amen.