Sunday, November 23, 2003
THE LEAST EXPECTED
Luke 17:11-19

It's the season of Thanksgiving, one of my favorite times of the year. In today's sermon, I have two themes. First, a brief history of Thanksgiving as a national holiday, and second, the necessity of being thankful as a daily practice, including the surprising fact that the least expected people are often the most thankful, and we can learn much from them.

The tradition of the Pilgrims' first Thanksgiving is filled with myth and legend. No one knows the exact date of the first Thanksgiving in 1621. We do know this: "Pilgrims" is a collective name for a group that covered many differences among the 102 people (one-third of them children) who stepped ashore at Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1620. In their own eyes, they were divided between the "Saints," those with religious reasons for leaving home, and the "Strangers," those with economic motives.

Despite their differences, they created the Mayflower Compact, an agreement for living peacefully together. They fought the cold, hunger, and illness that gripped the colony during that first devastating winter. By the spring of 1621, half of the original group had died, and whatever divisions they had on the voyage were replaced by a struggle for survival. Of the 50 people who survived, over half were children, and there were only four women. About half of those who survived were under the age of 16.

Most historians now agree that what people call the first Thanksgiving, the Pilgrims' celebration of their harvest in 1621, wasn't what we think of as Thanksgiving today. For those who came for religious reasons, Thanksgiving was a formal religious service. Nowhere in their writings about that first year do they mention such a service. They do mention a three-day feast, and historians believe it was a Harvest Home Festival celebration, like those held in England to celebrate the gathering of the crops. Though such celebrations were not formal religious events, they were thanksgiving festivals in spirit.

The date of this first festival was sometime between September 21 and November 9, 1621. Few realize that the Pilgrims did not celebrate a harvest festival the next year or any year thereafter, although some of their descendants later made a "Forefather's Day" on December 21 or 22.

The first Thanksgiving Proclamation issued by a governing authority was on June 20, 1676. The governing council of Charlestown, Massachusetts, expressed thanks for the good fortune that had seen their community securely established. By unanimous vote, they proclaimed June 29 as a day of Thanksgiving — the first such day in America.

Later, several presidents, including George Washington, made one-time Thanksgiving proclamations. In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln made Thanksgiving a national holiday with his Thanksgiving Proclamation.

For those who belong to churches such as ours in the Congregational tradition, we are direct denominational descendants of the Pilgrims of New England. While much about First-Plymouth Congregational Church today would astound the Pilgrims, we owe a great debt to them. They would recognize the importance of covenant as a basis for membership rather than right belief. Our spirit of open inquiry, our belief that "the Lord always has more light and truth to break

forth from His Holy Word," and our emphasis on education are all legacies from the Pilgrims. Though most Pilgrims were not learned people, they moved quickly to establish colleges like Harvard and Yale and later many more.

While the history of Thanksgiving as a holiday is mixed, the action of being thankful is a key part of our religious heritage as the people of God who follow the way of Jesus. Because of his own Jewish heritage, thanksgiving, expressing gratitude to God regularly, was a part of Jesus' life and hopefully is an important ingredient in your life and mine. I especially appreciate the festival of Thanksgiving each November because it reminds me to be thankful daily. Meister Eckhart said, "There is only one necessary prayer: 'Thanks.'"

One fact I've noticed about being thankful is that the most truly thankful people I've known have often been those who, on the surface, have the least reason to be thankful. That was true of the people who survived that first year in Plymouth, Massachusetts.

The story from the gospel of Luke illustrates that this has always been true. Jesus was met by ten lepers as he entered a village, and they cried out for help. Lepers in Jesus' day were society's outcasts. Leprosy was believed to be highly contagious, and lepers were required to live beyond regular human settlements, depending on charity for their living while their disease ravaged their bodies and disfigured their faces.

The lepers who met Jesus that day would've been ragged, deformed, and undernourished. Everyone else would have been horrified by their appearance. In their desperation, they called out to Jesus for mercy.

It's revealing how often in the gospel stories those who seek Jesus' help are people in extremity — the ill, outcasts, rejected, lonely, misunderstood, and powerless. Many people today reach out to Jesus for the same reasons. Jesus invited such people: "Come unto me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Luke tells us that Jesus had mercy on the lepers and told them to show themselves to the priests, who would confirm their healing and allow them to return to society.

Then the story takes a surprising turn. "One of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice, and he fell at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. And he was a Samaritan."

Frequently, this story is used as a text for sermons on Thanksgiving, as I am doing today. But the main point Luke wants to make is that the individual least expected to be praising and thanking God is the one who did so. He was the least expected because he was a Samaritan, and Samaritans were considered heretics and outside God's love by the religious authorities of that time.

Isn't it ironic that so often, it is the stranger, the outsider, the least expected who sees, hears, enjoys, and responds in gratitude for the countless gifts that we, through familiarity, have become blind to?

Notice that as long as the ten lepers were united in their misery, it made no difference who was a Jew and who was a Samaritan — they lived together as lepers. But after they were healed, old distinctions emerged again. The nine others probably would have nothing to do with that Samaritan ever again. Yet the twist in the story is that the one who was the outcast, the least expected, is the one who returned to give thanks.

Isn’t it strange that in times of misery or illness, we can live and work together without making the usual artificial distinctions, but in prosperity, we begin to separate ourselves from others?

According to the story, Jesus wondered about the others: “Where are they?” he asked. And in his question, he raised the issue of human ingratitude. How often do we, like the nine lepers, celebrate our good fortune without remembering to be thankful?

The story implies that all ten lepers remained healed, even though only one returned to give thanks. What has been given to them is not taken away. The same is true for us. Whether or not we are thankful does not change God’s grace toward us — but being thankful changes us.

When Jesus said to the Samaritan, “Your faith has made you well,” he was speaking of a deeper healing. This one leper not only was healed of his leprosy but also understood where his healing had come from. He was whole in a way the others were not.

This is the lesson of faith in this story. People of faith and thankfulness understand what the source of all goodness and wholeness is — and that makes all the difference.

The other lesson of faith in this story is how you give thanks. The temptation is to give thanks in a way that emphasizes your separation from others, as in the story of the man who prayed, “Father, I give thanks that I am not like other people.” But gratitude should not separate us from others. It should unite us.

My hope for this Thanksgiving, and for every Thanksgiving, is that our gratitude will move us beyond ourselves to the needs of others. Amen.