Sunday November 23, 2003

THE LEAST EXPECTED

Luke 17:11-19

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

The tradition of the Pilgrim's 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 the

first group of permanent settlers in New England. The name covers up the 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 a group divided between “Saints,” those people with religious reason for leaving home, and “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 there were on the voyage across the ocean were

muffled by the grief and determination to survive that was common among them. Of the 50 people who survived the first terrible winter, over half were children and there were only four women. About half of those who survived were under 16.

Most historians now agree that what people call the first Thanksgiving, that is, the Pilgrim's celebration of their harvest in 1621, wasn't what you think of as a typical Thanksgiving today. For those who came here for religious reasons, Thanksgiving was a formal religious service. Nowhere in their writings about the first year in Plymouth do they mention such a service. They do mention a three-day feast however, and historians believe it was a Harvest Home Festival celebration, such as those held in

England to celebrate the gathering of the crops. Though such celebrations did not have a formal religious dimension, they were in spirit, thanksgiving festivals.

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

The first Thanksgiving Proclamation issued by a governing authority was on June 20, 1676. On that date, the governing council of Charlestown,

Massachusetts, held a meeting to determine how to best express thanks for the good fortune that had seen their community securely established. By unanimous vote they instructed Edward Rawson, the clerk, to proclaim June 29, as a day of Thanksgiving, our first.

Later, several Presidents, including George Washington, made a one-time Thanksgiving holiday proclamation. In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln finally made it a national holiday with his 1863 Thanksgiving Proclamation.

Those who belong to churches such as ours in the Congregational tradition are the direct denominational descendants of the Pilgrims of New

England. Although there is much about our own First-Plymouth Congregational Church that would astound the Pilgrims, there is much about us that owes 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, of not being afraid to search for more truth is based on the Pilgrim's conviction that, "The Lord always has more light and truth to break forth from His Holy Word." The Pilgrims would affirm the emphasis we place on education. Although most of them were not people of learning, they moved quickly to establish colleges like Harvard and Yale and later many more.

Although the history of Thanksgiving as a national 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 on a regular basis 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 on a daily basis. Meister Ekhart 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 been those who on the surface have the least reasons to

be thankful or who you would least expect to be thankful and that was true of those people who survived that first year in Plymouth Massachusetts.

The story read today 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 wanted his 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 upon charity for their living while their disease, untreated, ravaged their bodies and disfigured their faces.

That small group of ten lepers who met Jesus that day would've been ragged, deformed and undernourished. Everyone else around them would have been horrified. In their extremity, they called out to Jesus for help.

It's revealing to note how often in the gospel stories those who lay claim to Jesus' power are in extremity–ill, outcasts, rejected, lonely, misunderstood, powerless. Many people today who reach out to Jesus do so 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." The gospel of Luke tells us Jesus had mercy on the lepers and told them to show themselves to

the priests, and as they went to do this, they were healed.

According to the religious rules of that day, the priests were empowered ~~who~~ to decide who was a leper and who was not and therefore had the power to determine whether a leper who claimed to be healed was in fact now clean and could return to normal society.

Now the story takes a surprising turn. “Then, one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice and he fell on his face at Jesus’s feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan.”

Frequently, this story from Luke's gospel is used as a text for sermons on Thanksgiving as I am doing today. But the main point that 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 supposed to have the wrong beliefs, the wrong kind of religion.

In Jesus' time and before they were considered heretics, they were thought to be outside God's love. They were supposed to be unacceptable in God's sight. This was the opinion of those who were sure they knew all about God.

Here is the truth that should get your attention. It is so often the stranger, the visitor, the outsider, the outcast, the least expected who sees, hears, enjoys and responds in gratitude for the countless gifts for which familiarity has made us deaf and blind.

The visitor in the home plays with the children the parents 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 has prepared the meal which others of us have eaten a thousand times in silence.

It's ironic that the one who returned to give thanks, the one who praised God, the one who though cleansed of his disease was still an outcast in

Jesus' world—a foreigner, a heretic, a traitor to the ancestral faith.

Notice also that as long as the ten were united in their misery, it apparently made no difference who was a Jew and who was a Samaritan—they lived together as lepers. Now that they were healed, the old distinctions emerged again.

The other nine would probably have nothing to do with that Samaritan or any other Samaritan ever again. However there's the unusual twist that the one who is the outcast, the least expected, is the one who returns to give thanks.

Isn't it strange that in misery or in illness or in tragedy, we human beings can live and work together without making the usual artificial distinctions. In misery, tragedy or in illness we are united. But when we come into prosperity, then we begin to separate ourselves from others.

According to the story, Jesus wonders about the others. "Where are they?" he asked. And in his wondering, he raises the nagging question of human ingratitude. It's easy for us today to look at the nine healed lepers with a sense of outrage. They had been healed of one of the worst diseases they could have. How could they celebrate their good fortune and forget to be thankful to God? Maybe they thought they deserved to be healed

and people are not usually grateful for getting what they think they deserved in the first place.

The story implies that all ten remained healed, even though nine of them had not expressed any gratitude. What has been given them is not taken away. Nor is what we have received taken from us when we are not grateful. Whether you are thankful or not thankful does not alter the way God deals with your life. God, in other words, is not small-minded or small-hearted. According to the Bible, God makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust. Remember this above all—being thankful does not change God, it changes you.

This is more than a story about healing and more than a story about being thankful. It is above all a story about the unconditional love of God. The love of God toward you has nothing to do with how loveable or un-loveable you are. God is continually gracious to the creation that God loves into being even when that creation and its creatures pay little or no attention. Once more remember this—being thankful does not change God, it changes you.

The people at home reading the newspaper this morning or who stayed in bed and never even thought of coming to church and offering thanks, will pass the day as much in safety as you will. Isn't that a bit upsetting?

Would it make you feel better if you knew that being here would bring you some reward that those at home with the newspaper or television or getting a few extra hours sleep would not get? You know you are not supposed to feel that way, but some of you perhaps do. Yet God goes on showering grace on the world regardless, sustaining those who cannot or will not give thanks. Being thankful does not change God, it changes you.

But there is nevertheless a difference. When Jesus said to the Samaritan leper, "Your faith has made you well," he meant a deeper healing had also taken place. The one leper who returned was not only healed of his leprosy, but also knew how he had been healed and where his healing had come

from. Because of his gratitude, he experienced an additional overflow of happiness.

Certainly that's the lesson of faith in this story. It's not that the people of faith and gratitude are any better than other people, or that they deserve or receive special treatment from God. It's that people of faith and thankfulness understand how the world really works, understand what the source of all goodness and wholeness and hope is. And that makes all the difference in the world in your life and mine.

The other lesson of faith in this story is in how you give thanks. The temptation is to give thanks in a way that implies or emphasizes your separation

from other people. You may not be as blatant as the man in another story that Jesus told about two people going into the temple to pray. The first one said, “Father, I give thanks that I am not like other people.” There is the temptation for those who are prosperous and have not known hardship, sadness or tragedy, to thank God that they are not like other people.

The world does not need more adherents of a God in whom they believe bestows blessing on a few chosen self-proclaimed righteous ones while denying the rest of God’s people.

If it is true that the purpose of being thankful is not to impress or change God, but rather to change us, my hope for this Thanksgiving and for every

Thanksgiving is that it be an experience of deep gratitude that moves us beyond ourselves to the needs of others. Amen.