
To Stop and Give Thanks

A sermon by Clayton Harrington
Thanksgiving Day – Year A

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

There are many things that I like about Thanksgiving. I like being able to share a feast with people that I care about. I like being able to take some time to simply rest in a season that tends to be a bit busy and stressful. I like cranberry sauce. But one of my favorite things about Thanksgiving is the little activity where you go around the table and every person says something, or a few things, for which they are thankful. It wasn't a tradition that I grew up with, but I have done it since moving to Atlanta and sharing in "Friendsgiving" with friends who were also unable to go back home for Thanksgiving. Between passing bread rolls and carving the turkey, we reflect on our lives in the past year.

I'll be honest, at first I did not like the idea of this. It seemed to be somewhat superficial – how am I supposed to pick just one thing without sounding selfish? It also requires a bit of vulnerability, as others will likely be thankful for something other than what I have stated and there's always the possibility of others judging what I say. And then, what if I'm still trying to figure out exactly what I'm going to say when it's my turn?!

Even with all of my reservations, it didn't take long for me to see the importance of this activity. There's something special about having to take a few seconds to pause and consider all that there is to be thankful for and to pick something. It is often something obvious like friends and family, or something less obvious like "another day" or a particular challenge that has caused someone to grow. Sometimes it's a particular person in the room, or a special dessert made from grandma's own recipe. I don't think that I've ever said the same thing twice. But, regardless of what we say, it's a special moment when we stop and go down our mental list of blessings to choose something that stands out and share it with the rest of those gathered. Because it's important to stop – to stop and to remember.

In today's Gospel reading we hear about one who stopped to be thankful. The story begins with Jesus in a liminal space, between Samaria and Galilee, and there he is approached by a group of lepers – people who would have been complete social outcasts because of their sickness. They would have had been dependent on the charity of others and would have been kept away from society because of their ritual impurity and the extreme contagiousness of skin disease.

Even so, Jesus sees them and takes time to speak with them and he gives them a task to complete. And it is only as they are going that they are made clean. Their obedience to Christ's instruction, their faith in him, cures them. They are cured of the ailment that had not only ruined their physical health, but also had prevented their participation in the greater community. And having been made clean, nine of them continue walking. I think we can be quick to judge them, but they have a duty to complete, Jesus told them to show themselves to a priest, so off to Jerusalem they must go.

But one stops. He stops and turns back to give thanks. He praises God and falls down at Jesus' feet and thanks him. We hear Jesus wonder aloud about whether the other nine were grateful for the gift that he had given them and, after a short pause, he tells the former leper to get up and continue on his way. And then Jesus surprises him and us by saying that this act of faith, this act of returning to give thanks, that is what has truly saved him.

Here Jesus connects faith and thanksgiving. In any relationship, trust and gratitude are key. To have faith in or to trust

someone else means that you give up full control of your own life; you place yourself or part of yourself in the hands of another. To be thankful means that you openly acknowledge that you are not where you are today solely because of your own merits and efforts. The same is true for our relationship with Christ. To have faith and to trust in Christ means that we allow Christ to be Lord in our lives. Thankfulness means that we take time to stop and acknowledge the things that Christ has done. Being thankful to God is itself an act of faith, because it is an act of stopping, remembering, and giving thanks.

I think, in the activity of going around the table and saying something that we are thankful for, we participate in the connecting of faith and thanksgiving. In between bites of green bean casserole, we have the chance to participate in sacred remembering, as we undo our forgetfulness of the good things that God has given us. We take time to reflect and to share, but we also hear the thankfulness of those around us, as we bear witness to their faith and gratitude to God, which enriches our own.

Today, as we leave this place and go about our Thanksgiving Day plans, may we stop to be thankful. As we sit around our dinner tables and listen to each person say what they are most thankful for, may we remember anew those things that God and others have done for us. As we continue to grow in faith, may we work to cultivate an attitude of gratitude, so that every day is Thanksgiving Day.

Amen.