

“Thank You Notes”
Deuteronomy 26:1-11, John 6:1-14
November 24, 2019

There are many things that I just don't like to do. Some, you might find a little idiosyncratic. For example, I don't like to wash lettuce. A little less unusual is the fact that I don't like to rake leaves (God put them on the ground for a reason) ... or drive automatic shift cars (I learned to drive in Scotland, where almost every car is a stick shift) ... or canvas my neighbors by phone about voting in an election - in fact, I don't like telephones much at all. And when it comes to things to eat: please, do not ever serve me Calves Brains. I've tried them.

Another thing that I don't like much involves writing Thank You notes. So maybe you can imagine what a nightmare my wedding was, with half of Long Island on the invite list. I had wanted a small and intimate ceremony. And since Susan and I had met in the U.K. during Divinity School, I thought that maybe something overseas would make sense; these days they call such things Destination Weddings. But back at that time, people thought of such things as immensely impractical, even though most of my family was in Paris.

Well, I had to wait a decade for that, when Susan and I reaffirmed our vows on our Tenth Anniversary in Scotland. There were one dozen of us in attendance - plus Averill and Jamey, who were 4 and 3 years old at the time. Only one dozen of us - and we consumed one dozen bottles of wine at the reception afterwards. Yes, it was quite a party, even though none of my French relatives made it.

But the wedding itself, ten years earlier? The guest list ran to about 400. I was responsible for about a dozen of them, mostly classmates from college; the other 388 attendees were basically unknown to me, having been invited by my father-in-law, the Rev. Henry G. Wyman, Doctor of Divinity, who was conducting the wedding ceremony in his church. So basically his entire congregation, and half the village, was invited.

Now, virtually each and every one of the 400 had to be sent a note of thanks, because they did not come to the wedding empty handed. That made for WEEKS of agony writing Thank Yous, especially when so many of the notes went something like this:

“Susan and I just loved your green fingers bowls with the gold trim. We use them every night at dinner time, and they have become a conversation piece. Thank you for helping to make our day so beautiful. Sincerely yours.”

“Green finger bowls...” I cannot abide the color green. “Green finger bowls with gold trim.” I can’t stand trim - gold, silver, any kind - on china. “Conversation piece”? To be perfectly honest, our guests didn’t talk about them, because we never used them. The one and only time Susan and I would talk about them would be to return them - back to the store. And yet out went a note of thanks, in some kind of attempt to be gracious.

And so, you’ve just learned that your pastor, at least in his 20’s, was not beyond stretching the truth - and I’m not sure that such prevaricating passed the “little white lie” test. Now, over thirty-nine years later, I still cringe at the entire episode. But if there’s one thing I’ve learned about preaching to a congregation, it’s often a little like “True Confessions.” At least, I think that’s what they used to call it. But now you know: My eternal soul is perhaps hanging in the balance, because of a Thank You Note that was less than truthful, and which I never really wanted to write in the first place.

As we have all learned, one of the ways we know that the Bible is true is because, when we read it, we find ourselves accurately pictured in its pages. Now, my Bible concordance does not have any reference to Thank You Notes in the Old Testament, or the Gospels, or the Epistles. But there are plenty of stories about ingratitude. And those are all too frightfully true to life.

For example, there’s the story of the ten lepers who were healed, but only one of whom returned to give thanks to his Healer. And then you might recall the Israelites, making their way to the Promised Land, complaining to Moses rather than thanking their

God for feeding and watering them in the Wilderness in one of the greatest stories of national liberation ever recorded. In fact, some of the children of Israel wanted to return to the House of Bondage, to slavery, instead of gratefully accepting the gift of freedom.

Does anyone remember the tale of Joseph, languishing in Pharaoh's jail, whose correct interpretation of a dream saved the Cupbearer's life ... but the Cupbearer did nothing in return to help spring Joseph from imprisonment. Scripture remembers the Cupbearer as an ungrateful wretch. And then there's King David - no saint himself - who complained when his good deeds for Nabal not only went unnoticed, but were "rewarded" with evil ... perhaps the phrase "No Good Deed Goes Unpunished" is exceptionally apt in this case.

What's more, there's an odd little passage from one of my favorite books of the Bible - Ecclesiastes 9, goes like this: "There was a little city with few people in it. A great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it. Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man." In other words, the poor man was never thanked - though I'm sure someone else was quick to take credit for that good deed of liberating the inhabitants of this otherwise unknown city.

I'm sure we have all been able to rationalize away thankless behavior. After all, I really don't like green ... or gold trim ... or finger bowls, for that matter. Yet such behavior does not relieve any of us of our responsibility for the gift, and to the giver.

Sometimes I wonder if it's just a question of perspective. Think of Christ, whom someone described this way: "He wasn't even born in the comfort of His own home. No neighbors took note of His birth except a few migrant workers. He had little formal education to speak of. He couldn't afford shoes. He owned, probably, only one cloak. He didn't have a fixed address. He never ran for office, or held a steady job, or opened a bank account. He didn't travel more than a few dozen miles from where He was born.

“One of His best friends betrayed Him. Some of His other friends gave up on Him. He died the death of a criminal, and was buried penniless. And yet, no one has had more influence for good on the whole of humanity, no one has been more of an inspiration, no one has been more looked to with eyes of yearning hopefulness, than this one Person. Life seemingly gave Him little. And yet He gives so much back in return. He had so little to be thankful for, and yet it is because of Him that millions today can give thanks in His Name to the Father.”

And as we learned in our Gospel lesson this morning, there once was a small boy who had only a couple of fishes and loaves. We don't know his name. He is never heard from again. Sort of like the anonymous poor man in the book of Ecclesiastes whose wisdom liberated an entire city. And yet no matter how unimportant and insignificant our small boy with the loaves and fishes might have seemed in the eyes of the world, in the eyes of our Lord, he was so much more. For what we might see as paltry, God can view as noteworthy. And what we might see as impressive, or consequential, can be, before the face of God, less than dust. One small boy in an act of generosity that may have seemed unworthy of consideration, made such a difference. For one small act made in sincerity can, in the hands of God, transform lives, for which we need to be thankful.

Indeed: Thanks be to God for such an unspeakable gift.

Let us pray: