

Thank Each Other  
Luke 17:11-19 / Ephesians 1:15-18  
Colebrook Congregational Church  
Thanksgiving Sunday 2014

Throughout history and the world, there have been many kinds of thanksgiving celebrations. They celebrate the harvest or mark a significant event that had happened, like a good harvest, a military victory, etc., and were generally one time events. The first Thanksgiving celebration that we recognize as starting this annual feast by our theological ancestors, the Pilgrims, was in 1621 in Plymouth, Massachusetts.

When the Pilgrims landed the year before, they found themselves in the wrong place. Their ship went off course on their way to Virginia and they were running out of beer to drink, so they made landfall at the first land they could find, which was Cape Cod. When they landed, they founded a scene out of a post-apocalyptic horror film. Back in the 1520s, a French-sponsored exploration expedition found that the east coast was densely populated by native tribes, but by the time the Pilgrims arrived just less than a century later, the deadliest plague in human history had wiped out well over 90% of the native population.

The Pilgrims found a full constructed town in what they would call Plymouth, but it was no longer populated. A ghost town...and they just moved in. The local great chief just happened to have among his tribe a man named Squanto, who was from that town, who survived the plague because he was captured by a British sea captain and sold into slavery in England just prior to its arrival, escaping during a return expedition led by Captain Smith, returning just after it. Because Squanto could speak English, the Sachem of the Wampanoag Tribe, Massasoit, sent Squanto to be his liaison with the settlers and to help them survive, because the conditions were not good, and half the Pilgrims that landed ended up dying during that first

year. Squanto was sent to help them cultivate the abandoned town's farmlands, and slowly, they were able to start growing their own food. Also in that first year, Massasoit had difficulties with a renegade tribesman, which led to a battle where the Pilgrims had sent some of their own men to assist their native allies.

So, the combination of the Pilgrims being able to grow and the harvest the food that they needed to survive and the Wampanoag achieving a military victory over an enemy, led the Pilgrims to plan a three day Thanksgiving feast. They had all the harvested foods, corn, squashes, grains, potatoes, fruits, and they sent out hunters for all types of fowl, especially turkeys, and the Wampanoags contributed other game, like venison.

The first Thanksgivings were considered religious holidays, but they soon became a civil holiday, and as it turned out, they were held almost every other year due to frequent drought or famines and then they celebrated the return of bounty, usually the next year. It wasn't until 1680 that it became an annual holiday.

Furthermore, in my opinion, one thing that makes us Congregationalists unique, is the emphasis on food. At nearly every gathering we have, not just on Sundays, we have food that we share with each other. This is just my opinion, but I think it is because of this early time, when we did not always have enough to eat, and so we gave truly heartfelt thanks to God for the times of plenty, and celebrated this with the sharing of food. Many of my colleagues disagree with me, so take it as you will.

There are many kinds of gratitude that people can express. There is the thanks that is automatically replied as part of everyday conversations. Working in retail the last three years, I can tell you that I have said thanks rather mindlessly a couple hundred times at least per

shift, and I have been on the receiving end of mindless thanks...not as often, though, depending on the customer. What I have also found working retail, is what seems like a disingenuous thanks. Especially during the holidays when we do a book drive to give books to sick local kids. Here is a secret from the other side of the counter. Retail workers are not mindless drones, and we have a lot of time to think over things that are said to us...maybe TOO much time, I will be the first to admit. We would ask the customer to donate a \$4 book, and surprisingly we actually prefer the customers that just say NO, and say nothing else. What irks many of us, with our too much time to think and analyze what is said to us, is when the customer declines, tells us that it is a good idea, and gives a seemingly heartfelt thanks for offering. It seems odd on the receiving end in my colleague's opinions, why would they say that? The thanks seems unnecessary and disingenuous, and many of us have expressed difficulties with schooling their facial expressions to keep them neutral when this happens.

There is the type of thanks that we offer towards God in worship and prayer. I remember hearing someone talking once, on the subject of praying, that God is not a cosmic cash machine, and that we do not offer thanks to God as much as we should. I meditated on that and realized that in my own prayers, he was right, and I challenged myself to start every prayer with a thanks to God for something. I found that it could be hard at times, especially during the darker times in my life, where I have ended up on my knees silently for quite a long time, searching for something to thank God for at the start of my prayer, and eventually I could find something. I once saw a single panel comic pinned to the door jam of the church in Otis, MA, that I used to help me during those times. I do not remember the picture, but the caption was the important part, it said, "Do not be angry with God for making the cheetah so fast, thank God for not giving the cheetah wings."

The other type of thanks is the kind we see expressed by the Samaritan that Jesus healed as part of a group of ten lepers in the Gospel of Luke. The ten lepers called out to Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, begging for themselves to be healed. Jesus obliged, but only one is noted to have thanked God, and then returned to thank Jesus personally. Jesus was not just hanging out, Jesus was traveling, on his way to Jerusalem, so that healed man needed to go find Jesus. He did not have the help of phones or social media, he had to run around the countryside to find Jesus again. And when he did find him, he gives him a truly heartfelt thanks for healing him. Jesus responded by telling him that his faithful behavior has made him well.

It took a lot more effort for the Samaritan to find Jesus again to offer him that heartfelt thanks. It was definitely not like the automatic thanks found in everyday conversations. It was true thankfulness. And while it is written that Jesus is annoyed about the absence of the other nine healed men, whom are assumed to be either Galilean or Israelites, and therefore Jesus' own countrymen; we can see that Jesus is very pleased by the one foreigner who took the effort to find him again and give him special thanks. And also, I believe that when Jesus tells someone that there are well, it is not meant just physically, but more completely. He has become well physically, as his affliction has been healed; emotionally, because he is no longer a social outcast and he may rejoin society again; and spiritually, as he has pleased God with his thanks.

I think that is what the lesson here is. When we give truly felt thanks, especially when we go out of our way or have gone through some extra effort to express it, it has an effect on both the giver and the receiver. The receiver is pleased, as Jesus was pleased, and also feels appreciated by others; and the giver, like the healed man, is made “well” in many ways due to their expression of gratitude.

Johnathan Edwards, the eighteenth century Congregationalist theologian, America's best contribution to theological discourse...and my favorite theologian as well, in his theology of love called Religious Affections, posits that when we do something for someone else, we do the same for God in that instance. So when we give someone a truly heartfelt thanks for something, we are also giving that truly heartfelt thanks to God as well. It is a two for one giving of thanks!

Now, I do not know for certain what happened here before I arrived that caused the diminishing of church attendance and membership, but what I do know, what I have seen, is that many people have stood up and taken on responsibilities that they never imagined having to do. They have worked so hard to help hold this church and its community together, and everyone has felt the strain and has done whatever they could to help out this community. The past couple weeks, I have attended committee meetings and met with members, and I have heard some of these stories, of people doing what they can, of their efforts above and beyond expectations, for the good of us all.

To all of you, I say, THANK YOU! Thank you for all that you have done, and for what you will do in the coming time of rebuilding. Thank you.

I would also call on everyone to go and turn to your neighbors, and for everything that they have done to keep this church going, say....Thank you.

Amen.