

“The Well Of Thanksgiving”

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Luke 17:11-19

Since today is Thanksgiving Sunday, perhaps it would be fitting that I began by talking about Turkey. But I'm not. Instead I'm going to begin by talking about a chicken sandwich. Recently I was reading an article in The Christian Century magazine, in which the author was reflecting on a recent experience at a Burger King drive thru, when as he began to unwrap the chicken sandwich he had ordered for his lunch, he noticed the following words written on the thin, grease resistant paper that served as the wrapping for his sandwich.

“You have the right to have things your way,” it read. “The right to a sandwich just how you want it. The right to eat it fast. The right to eat it slow. The right to start your own sandwich etiquette school. The right to have a one-man sandwich eating contest.” He went on to say that “only in America is one reminded of one's right to eat a chicken sandwich!”

Although I would say that not only is this the case for our neighbours south of the border. We like our rights here in Canada too! By way of research for today, I actually went to a Canadian Burger King and ordered a chicken sandwich. I didn't find the same words on the package but I did see posted the words up on the screen here that say, “you have the right to have what you want., exactly when you want it.” Although I have to say, that if its my right to have a chicken sandwich the way I want it...after eating the one I ordered felt as if my rights had been violated! Especially after I had a look at the nutritional information!

But this language of rights, of personal rights and individual rights, even though it can become trivialized on a fast food wrapper, it now imbues so much of our social, political and legal discourse. It even finds it's way into family dynamics as children and spouses often seek to claim their rights and what they are owed in interpersonal relationships. In Canada talk of one's rights is an everyday occurrence. We love the language of rights. We even have a Charter of Rights and Freedoms that have cemented the language of rights into our country's DNA.

Now don't hear me wrong, rights are beautiful. Where would we be without them? Take a look at the majesty of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights if you doubt their value.

There is a problem however, in that individual rights, when pressed to their extreme, allow us to be accountable only to ourselves, live lives purely for ourselves...we become obsessed with our rights.

You see there is no conversation to be had if rights are about me and my rights...you no longer have any say in the matter. It ends up with me caring more for my right to have it my way...go my own way. We can begin to feel a sense of entitlement and believe that we are only getting what we think we deserve out of life. That this life owes me. There can be no sense of obligation to another.

You see, if society is built only on the notion that we possess rights given to us at birth, why bother to express thanks? Gratitude becomes unnecessary when life is viewed as entitlement instead of gift. Why feel gratitude or a deep sense of obligation to others if you have only received what you deserve?

This is where our reading for today comes in, the one that Charmaine read for us taken from the Gospel of Luke. Back in first century Judea, although people may not have talked about rights the way you or I do, there were certain rights that individuals may have assumed. Things they began to feel entitled too because of the obligations that were placed on others. Such is the case for these ten lepers that Jesus encountered when he entered a village while walking through the region between Galilee and Samaria. I know this may sound strange, but you see, back then, under the law, Jews had an obligation to care for the poor. There are throughout the Mosaic Law and in other Jewish writings, a recognition of the necessity of almsgiving. These ten lepers that Jesus encountered, would have expected, perhaps even seen it as their right, that Jesus would, after they called out to him for help, that he would reach into his purse and toss them a few coins.

When they say, "Master, have mercy on us!" Those ten lepers probably would have said that to just about anybody who walked by. That was the life they had come to know and expect. It should be noted that when the text says these individuals suffered from leprosy, as Charmaine told us, this could refer to almost any skin disease. Back then people with anything from psoriasis, eczema, a rash, even bad acne could be considered as ones who were unclean and therefore untouchable. As ones categorized as unclean, they were not included in the full

scope of a community's social life. They would have been relegated to the edges. Thus they are encountered by Jesus as soon as he gets to the village. They are there on the perimeter. Yet they are also there on the perimeter for another reason...because it gave them ample opportunity to exercise their right to almsgiving as people came and went. The patronizing address of "Master" to those who walked by, immediately set the nature and the terms of the relationship. If those who walked by were "Master," the begging lepers were the ones dependent upon them for their well being. It was an appeal and a way to remind these passers by of their moral obligation to the poor. The lepers are seeking to get what they believe they are owed...what they deserve.

However, when they seek to do this with Jesus. In typical Jesus fashion, Jesus does things a little different. Jesus doesn't just throw them a few coins and go on his way. Instead, when he sees them, he says "go and show yourselves to the priests." The priests back then, being the ones who would declare the lepers to be clean rather than unclean. Jesus doesn't just give them what they were owed according to the moral obligations of his day, he gives them a renewed sense of their humanity. Off they go on their way, they are made clean. Some may call this a miracle and perhaps it is. I cannot explain how it was that these individuals were made clean. The text does not tell us. Besides, I don't believe it is our job to explain away these miracles, as much as it is to accept them as a gift.

Yet it does not appear as if all of the ten lepers saw what they received that day as a gift. Maybe they felt as if Jesus the miracle worker owed it to them. They just got what they deserved. Only one of them returns to Jesus, praising God and thanking him for what he had received. Only one comes back. Only one feels obliged to express a sense of gratitude. And this is where our reading, and Jesus has something special to teach us this morning. And we discern this in the words that Jesus has for the one who returns giving praise. Jesus says, "Get up and go on your way, your faith has made you well."

There is something else going on in the heart and in the life of this man. There is a Spirit at work that moves him to give thanks. This man is not only clean...that is, deemed socially acceptable in his day. He is declared by Jesus to be well. There is something about this man's

thankful attitude that has contributed to his “Wellness.” As one commentator I read put it, “(He) viewed his renewal, his life, as a splendid gift of God.”

When one views life in such a way, the sense of individualism wanes and along with it the obsession that we must get what we deserve...secure our entitlements. We become well because we actually begin to have a more authentic understanding of our dependence on others and on God for what we have. We become well because we gain a proper perspective on our true humanity and place in life.

This notion that thanksgiving or gratitude is an essential component to our human wellness and health is something that researchers and scientists have picked up on in recent years. There is now even a “science of gratitude.” A few years ago, the Greater Good Science Centre at the University of California, Berkeley launched a multi-year project called, “Expanding the Science and Practice of Gratitude.” Imagine that! And the project is not just some fanciful endeavor, it is being done for a reason.

The people at the Gratitude Project acknowledge that the words “thank you” have become an essential part of family dinners, trips to the store, business deals and negotiations. But because the words are so commonplace, perhaps we have ignored the fact that these words need our serious attention. They note that in our western world, with the rise of individual rights and the growth of the culture of entitlement, that there has been a decrease in human wellness. People are feeling more anxious and isolated than ever. The project research has shown that gratitude, when it is fostered and cultivated at a deeper level has shown in individuals to produce stronger immune systems and lower blood pressure. Higher levels of positive emotions. More joy, optimism and happiness. Acting with more compassion towards others. And experience fewer feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Robert Emmons, perhaps the world’s leading scientific expert on gratitude, argues that gratitude has two key components. “First,” he writes, “it’s an affirmation of goodness. We affirm that there are good things in the world, gifts and benefits we’ve received.” In the second part of gratitude, he explains, “we recognize that the sources of this goodness are outside of ourselves. ... We acknowledge that other people—or powers beyond us, —gave us many gifts, big and small, to help us achieve the goodness in our lives.” Gratitude is as a relationship-

strengthening emotion, because it requires us to see how we've been supported and affirmed by others." It is a part of the moral memory of humankind. It crosses religions, cultures, languages, ages and lifetimes...it is spiritual.

And you know, I would say that work on the science of gratitude is something that actually began long ago. After all this theme of thanksgiving to God is a major one that exists within the scriptures. The scriptures give gratitude serious attention! Time and again God's people are reminded to take this deeply spiritual work of thanksgiving seriously, not because God expect it or thinks it is deserved, but because of what it means to the wellness of our human communities and relationships. In fact, there are commandments given in the scriptures, such as the commandment remembered in the book of Nehemiah, where all Israel was obligated to contribute to the daily portions of the musicians and the ones who brought forth songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. Ones who took the time and whose job it was to give thanksgiving, were considered to be of such value that they were in fact doing a public service to others. Thanksgiving was vital to social wellness.

In the Scriptures, so serious is the topic of Thanksgiving it is actually a category of Psalms. It has been determined that there are five types of psalms. There are psalms of praise, wisdom, royal, lament, and thanksgiving. Thanksgiving has a special place. Some might also say the same when it comes to prayer. There are four kinds of prayer. Prayers of adoration. Prayers of contrition. Prayers of supplication. And yes, prayers of thanksgiving. The apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Thessalonians that they were to be thankful in all things. While Jesus, full of God's Spirit. Ate, drank and slept gratitude. In his life we see one who always gave thanks and said a blessing before a meal. Jesus gave thanks to the one he called his Father in heaven for his followers and friends.

Jesus reached out and provided for others in such a way, as he did for the ones he encountered when he entered the village that day, that he moved people to gratitude. You see, thanksgiving isn't just something we do or give, it is a gift we receive and share. It is a sacred energy...a movement. When we are open to this gift of the Spirit, we experience greater joy in our lives and our relationships.

The Christian Thinker Henri Nouwen reflected on this important insight while traveling in Latin America. He reflected, "We people of the first world emphasize our rights. We claim our right to food, health, shelter, and education. [We] relate to the goods of life as possessions that are ours and [that] need to be conquered...and defended. Although the poor in the third world do not deny that they have basic human rights, their emphasis is on the giftedness of life...The goods that come to them are experienced as free gifts of God...gifts to be grateful for and to celebrate."

My friends, may we also be ones who can name and celebrate these free gifts of God in life...the other sources, people, and the power beyond us that gives us gifts great and small. May we celebrate the gift of Thanksgiving itself, blessed with enough faith to stop and say thank you. For when we drink from the deep well of thanksgiving we too are made well.