

“RETURN TO SENDER”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Thanksgiving Sunday

Luke 17:11-19

As you are all well aware, Thanksgiving is just around the corner - just four days away. Tonight, there's a Community Thanksgiving service at Immaculate Conception Church where all of us, from all the churches across Elkton will gather together to worship. Then, the next four days will be filled with activity for many of us.

Many, I know, will be traveling, and you're getting ready to make your final plans, and pack your bags - getting ready to, in the words of an old song we used to sing when we were driving to New York to see my grandmother - go “over the river, and through the woods, to grandmother's house we go.”

Still others of you are shining up silverware, and making sure you have all the ingredients for stuffing and pies and so much other delicious food - not to mention the turkey.

And many of us will be looking forward to our families getting together for this special day.

It is a wonderful time, and Thanksgiving is a wonderful holiday. You know why? Well, not just for the obvious reason - that it's a day on which to give thanks for the great blessings we have - but also, because it's just a day to be with those you love. You don't have to buy and bring presents, and worry about putting up a tree and decorating the house like you do on Christmas, it's just about being together with those you love.

When I sat down to start working on this sermon, just out of curiosity, I googled the word “thanksgiving.” Up came wikipedia, and as you might imagine, the website was filled with historical information, and with varying descriptions of the origin of the holiday. Some say it started with the Pilgrims and the Native Americans in New England in the 1600's. Some say it started before that, as a Protestant and Puritan response to Catholic “holy days.”

The site goes on to talk about how US presidents, since the time of George Washington, have all invited our country to celebrate a day of thanksgiving for all

of the blessings God has poured upon us. And the site included all the ways we do celebrate - with parades, and food, and family, and so on.

But the most startling line appeared near the end of the first paragraph of the article - I couldn't believe my eyes! I had to blink twice before I read it again. This is what it said: Today, Thanksgiving is primarily observed as a secular holiday.

What? A secular holiday. Who, exactly, is it, do they think, that we're thanking on thanksgiving? A secular holiday? Nothing could be further from the truth.

Of course, I'm sure what they meant is that far too many people forget what Thanksgiving is all about. Far too many people just observe many of the traditions of the day - the meal, the football, the family gatherings, the parades - and never take the time to give thanks. They forget.

And lest we get haughty and too self-satisfied, let us admit that there are times when we forget too. For evidence of that, we need only turn to this morning's Gospel lesson, and there it is, in living color. Forgetting to give thanks.

Let's go back to the lesson for a few moments. You know the story. It's about the ten lepers. Ten people who were stricken with that awful, awful disease. A disease that ate up their skin and kept them forever separated from others. A disease that made paupers out of them, because they couldn't work, they couldn't be around people, they couldn't escape the pain of the leprosy. These were ten people who had literally lost everything in the world that mattered to them. They couldn't be with their families, they couldn't be around people, they were scorned and feared - they had nothing, and they were desperate. And now, here comes this man whom they've heard has done miraculous healings.

So they call out to him from a distance, because they know their place, they know no one will allow them near. They call out to him and ask for his mercy and his healing. And, by the grace of God, Jesus causes them to be healed. In an instant, their lives go from shattered to whole. In an instant, they are welcomed back into society. In an instant, people come at them with open arms, instead of slammed doors. In an instant, they are healthy and whole, and all's right with the world - and off they go, running back into that wonderful world.

All except one of them. One of them turned back, praised God with a loud voice, laid down at Jesus' feet, and poured out his thanks. I can't imagine that there was a dry eye in the house - anyone watching that would have been moved beyond words. He returned to the sender of his healing, and he gave thanks.

But there were nine who didn't. Were they evil? No, I don't think so.

Were they callous? I don't even think that. I think they were like us. So often, when we're in the thick of things, when times are hard, when we're in pain, when a crisis erupts, we run to Jesus on bended knee, crying out for his help - and he is there.

But then when things get better, or the pain ends, or the crisis is over, we get up and get going - and yes, we're thankful - but we're too busy with life that we forget to say thank you to the One who did it all.

I think those nine lepers were, as one writer put it, "too busy being well," to stop and give God thanks. They were running free, they were touching and being touched, something that hadn't been possible for so long. They were reveling in the love of their families, and just enjoying being able to be in a crowd. And they got so wrapped up in the busyness of all that, that Jesus was forgotten.

I'm sorry to say that that happens to all of us sometimes. I mean, think about it. Have you ever had a time when you drove home from someplace and then when you arrived, you forgot how you even got there? Your mind was so filled with thoughts of things you had to do, or things that had happened that day, or kids arguing in the back seat, that you drove home mindlessly. The busyness of life took away your awareness.

I think that's how we forget to say thanks sometimes - we're too busy with life, just as those nine lepers were. So we forget.

So today, as we approach Thanksgiving, I want to invite us to be more intentional in remembering to always and everywhere return our thanks to the Sender of all of the blessings in our lives. And this morning, I want to invite us to do that in three ways.

First, may we remember and give thanks everyday for the "big" things that God has given us. Things like healing, new beginnings, new life, new opportunities, restored relationships, salvation. The things that we could never have done on our own, but have only come to pass because of the grace of Almighty God. Only you know what those things are in your life. But you know that through them God made you whole. Never forget to give thanks to God for those big things He has given you.

I remember reading something Paul Harvey wrote once about an old man who visited an old broken pier on a Florida beach every Friday night for years, until his death in 1973. Every Friday night he would arrive at the pier, walking slowly and stooped over, carrying a bucket of shrimp. The sea gulls would flock to the man, and he would feed them the shrimp from his bucket.

The man's name was Eddie Rickenbacker. I know some of you know who

that is. In October of 1942, Captain Eddie Rickenbacker was on a mission in a B17 to deliver something to Gen. Douglas MacArthur in New Guinea. But something went tragically wrong, and the plane went down in the ocean. The crew scrambled into life rafts, and stayed there for nearly a month.

For that horrible month, they fought the water, the weather, the scorching heat. They spent many a night with no sleep because their rafts were being circled by sharks. But their biggest enemy was starvation. After eight days in the water, their rations were completely gone, and they knew it would take a miracle to keep them alive.

Well, one afternoon, they were having a time of devotions, and Eddie later wrote, that “Cherry (who was Captain William Cherry) read the service, and we finished with a prayer for deliverance and a hymn of praise. There was some talk, but it tapered off in the oppressive heat. With my hat pulled down (he wrote) over my eyes to keep out some of the glare, I dozed off. Then, something landed on my head. I knew that it was a sea gull. I don’t know how I knew, I just knew. Everyone else knew too. No one said a word, but peering out from under my hat brim without moving my head, I could see the expression on their faces. They were staring at that gull. The gull meant food . . . if I could catch it.”

Which he did, and which they ate, and it saved their lives.

And, years later, Eddie Rickenbacker spent every Friday evening on the coast of Florida feeding sea gulls - to remember that one which, on a day so long ago, gave itself without a struggle, like manna in the wilderness. (On-line, Paul Harvey telling Paul Aurandt’s story, “The Old Man and the Gulls”)

Never forget to give God thanks for the “big” things He has done for you, the things that have changed your life, and made you whole.

And secondly, never forget to give God thanks for the on-going blessings in your life - the things that surround you every day. Those are some of the things we take most for granted, the things we pass by so quickly without a second thought, because they’re always there. Things like the beauty of a starlit sky, the comfort of our homes, a job, friends, family. Never forget to give God thanks for these on-going blessings.

There’s a little girl who could show us all a thing or two about how to do that. She was in class one day with the rest of her classmates, when their teacher asked each of them to make a list of the present-day seven wonders of the world. Although there were a lot of different answers, most of the students came up with these things:

1. The Great Pyramids of Egypt
2. The Taj Mahal
3. The Grand Canyon
4. The Panama Canal
5. The Empire State Building (this was a while ago, when it was the tallest building around)
6. St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican
7. The Great Wall of China

While gathering up the votes, the teacher noticed that this little girl hadn't turned in her paper yet. So she asked her if she was having trouble making a list. "Yes," the girl said, "a little. I couldn't quite make up my mind because there were so many." The teacher said, "Well, tell us what you have. Read your list and maybe we can help."

Hesitantly, the girl stood up and started to read. "I think the seven wonders of the world are -

1. To be able to see
2. To be able to hear
3. To be able to touch
4. To be able to feel
5. To be able to taste
6. To be able to laugh
7. To be able to love.

(James W. Moore, *There's a Hole in Your Soul Only God Can Fill*, p. 33)

Out of the mouths of babe! She got it, didn't she? She got the wonder of the wonderful blessings God had given her, the wonderful blessings God gives all of us. Give thanks always for those wonderful things.

Finally, give God thanks for those small things that every once in a while show up and melt your heart with joy - those things that are the icing on the cake of life. Make a list of those things sometime. I told you last week about how, during November, a lot of people are posting some of these things on Facebook everyday. Make your own list and give God thanks for all of them.

I did that as I worked on this sermon. I just sat there and thought about moments and things that just made me happy - thoroughly and completely happy. Things like - holding my newborn great-niece Isabella, feeling her snuggle up under my chin, and smelling that wonderful baby smell; looking up at the balcony on a

Sunday morning, and seeing the sunlight streaming through the stained glass windows; warm socks on a cold day; a good book; hearing the first notes of a rousing organ postlude as I go down the steps after worship; a Woody's crabcake; waiting in a long line to vote on election day; saying "I love you" to Damien and hearing "I love you more" back; Dunkin' Donuts coffee; laughing til tears ran down my face with people here at church at a meeting this week.

Oh, the list could go on and on. Make your list, my friends. Make your list because it will remind you how very blessed you are, and how much at work in your life is Almighty God, every single day of your life. Do not forget to stop, and return to the Sender of all these gifts your thanks and praise - not just on Thanksgiving but every day of the year.

I want to close with one final invitation by way of the words to a song. One of the very first concerts I ever attended in my teens was The Carpenters. A lot of you remember them, but if you've never heard of them, they were a brother and sister group that sang wonderful songs together. Karen Carpenter had one of the clearest, most beautiful voices ever.

One of their songs that I liked the best is called "Sometimes." The words were written by a woman named Felice Mancini for her parents, the composer Henry Mancini and his wife. So moved was Henry Mancini by the words that he put them to music, and the Carpenters recorded the song.

It goes like this:

Sometimes, not often enough, we reflect upon the good things, and our thoughts always center around those we love. And I think about those people who mean so much to me; who, for so many years have made me so very happy. And I think about the times I have forgotten to say, "Thank you!" and just how much I love them!

My friends, my final invitation to you today is during this Thanksgiving week ahead - tell them - tell those you love just how much you love them, and thank them for who they are and what they mean to you. And above all, thank God for it all.

Amen.