

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
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Luke 17:11-18

“Choosing Gratitude”

I was listening to a podcast last week on how to make gravy – because I’m a nerd like that and even though I know how to make gravy, I listened to the podcast because the cook they interviewed had tips on how to make gravy ahead of time that I wanted to hear.

However, it turns out that the podcast was about much more than just making gravy. It had some tips on how to keep the peace at Thanksgiving because, let’s be honest, there could be rancor around the table this year. It may not all be peace and harmony depending on the political divide in your family.

Sam Sifton, a food writer for the NY Times who was featured on the podcast, offers these tips for getting along at Thanksgiving:

1. Concentrate on the love part. You’re there at the table because someone there loves you and/or cares enough about you to invite you, so remember that. You’re not going to change anyone’s mind about the election no matter how eloquent you are, so don’t gloat, mock, tease, or make anyone feel badly.
2. Don’t mess with the food. Just don’t. It’s Thanksgiving, which is a holiday all about tradition. This is not the year to trot out a new recipe or mix things up, because everyone finds community over food. And everyone knows what they want on Thanksgiving. Which leads to #3.
3. Have a turkey, no ifs, ands, or buts. Even if you don’t like turkey, have a turkey. Why? See rule #2 about not messing with the food. But also, talking about the turkey can prevent you from talking about something else, like the election. Turkey talk is part of the day. It’s what people ask about when they first walk through the door. What time did you put it in oven? What temperature? And then there’s the discussion around the pros and cons of long and slow cooking at a consistent temperature, or roasting it a high temperature for a short amount of time and then lowering the oven temp.

And of course, one could go on for hours about brining versus not brining, stuffing the bird or not stuffing the bird, and everything else. So just do yourself a favor and everyone else and have a turkey.

4. And finally, the very last word of advice, but perhaps the most important, is don't skimp on the gravy. As Sam Sifton said, "Gravy binds us together as a nation". A good gravy heals all divides. So don't be stingy with it, because "Thanksgiving is going to be tough enough without skimping on the gravy." And then he adds: "if you find yourself as the outlier (at the table), as many Americans will this Thanksgiving, I think we just gotta — this year and perhaps always — practice Gratitude.

I love that: *practice gratitude*. The very idea of practicing means we need help with it, or we could be better at it. So, here's what I want all of us to do: I want all of us to practice being grateful. I want all of us to commit to practicing gratitude this week. Because gratitude doesn't always come naturally; we think it should, but it doesn't, which is why we need to practice. Being grateful is a choice; and the more we practice it, the more we'll choose it. And there can be no better story about choosing gratitude than the one we just heard from Luke. Only Luke tells this story about the 10 lepers, but it's a wonderful story – and a good reminder of the importance of gratitude.

When we meet up with Jesus today, he's on this way to Jerusalem, when he and the disciples encounter 10 men with leprosy. Leprosy was a highly contagious skin disease. In fact, it was so contagious that people with leprosy would have been banished from their homes and their faith communities because people were so scared that they would contract the disease just by being close to them. In many ways it's difficult for us to fully grasp the social alienation and isolation to which people with leprosy were subjected. The closest thing to it would be the isolation people living with AIDS would have experienced in the 1980s and early 90s.

The ten lepers yell at Jesus: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!", and Jesus does. When he saw the men, he called out to them and said, "Go and show yourselves to the priests," because the priests were the only ones who could certify that the leprosy was gone and therefore the men were fit to live in public again. So off they go, to show themselves to the priests, and along the way they're healed. But

then one of them does something inexplicable. He turns around, runs back to Jesus, and thanks him.

Just one.

The other 9 went on ahead to the priests which, in their defense, they did exactly what Jesus told them to do.

But still, only 1 thought it was a good idea to say “thank you”, to be grateful. Just one made the choice to practice gratitude.

Think about it. Like the lepers, we can choose to be grateful, or not. We can choose to live grateful lives, or not. On any given day we have a whole host of emotions we can choose. Gratitude isn't the only one we might choose to express in response to events of any given day. We can and often do choose fear, resentment, hostility, jealousy, sadness, and a range of other emotions. And sometimes those emotions are appropriate. Don't get me wrong; there are absolutely things we should not be grateful for: violence, injustice, cancer. I don't know if you know this, but Christians can say the worst things to people in pain. They say things like, “This feels terrible right now but the Bible tells us we should be grateful for everything.” Christians do this all the time, saying to people they should be grateful for getting cancer, or that their spouse left them, or that they lost your job.

But you should *never* tell a person who has been a victim of injustice or pain to be thankful *for* those things. No where does the Bible say we should be thankful for all things. What the Bible says is that we should be thankful *through* or *in* those things. And *For* isn't the same thing as *through*. Prepositions matter.

No one should be thankful for cancer; but you can be thankful for the people who help you through it. No one should be thankful for being abused or for injustice; but you can be thankful for the resiliency to fight back. Gratitude isn't a happy pill. There are reasons to feel fear, anger, frustration, grief, regret, or apprehension.

Yet at the same time, we choose how much stage time to grant those emotions, and the more time we give them, the more power they have in our lives. Choosing gratitude (or not) shapes our outlook on life and affects the people around us.

Think about the people you like to be around; chances are good they practice gratitude.

And these days, gratitude can be very counter-cultural because it has the power to push against the tides of resentment and complaint. Elie Wiesel once said, "When a person doesn't have gratitude, something is missing in his or her humanity." Isn't that the truth. Gratitude also, despite what most Americans think, has nothing to do with how comfortable we are or how much stuff we have.

Rabbi Harold Kushner once said: "Gratitude is a way of looking at the world that does not change the facts of your life but has the power to make your life more enjoyable."

Look, we all know that accusations, excuses, and venting anger seem to have hold of our culture. Indeed, we seem to live in the age of resentment, whether shared in person or increasingly through social media. What a powerful response gratitude can be to that.

And it's in this light that saying "I'm grateful" not only expresses our thanksgiving but gives voice to a counter-cultural witness that has the power to shape those around us, push back the tide of resentment and complaint that ails us, and makes room for a fresh appreciation of God's renewing, saving grace.

Because here's the thing: gratitude, like all our other emotions, gets easier the more we practice it. Gratitude is not an inborn trait that some have and others don't, but rather gratitude is more like a muscle that can be strengthened over time. And as we practice giving thanks and more frequently share our gratitude, we're not only growing in gratitude but we're creating an example for others. And, we're creating a climate that encourages those around us to do the same.

This is why this week I want all of us to practice gratitude.

Here's where you can begin. Instead of asking everyone around the Thanksgiving table to say something they're thankful for, I want you to change the preposition. Try using the prepositions to, through, by, with, or within. For example:

To whom or what are you grateful?
What challenges have you been grateful through?
Have you been grateful with others?
Where have you discovered gratitude within?
Has something in your life been changed by being grateful?
In what circumstances have you experienced thankfulness?

Other prepositions open our imaginations to see and experience gratefulness as something deeper and that has the power to change our attitude and outlook, and with the continued divisions in our social lives, families, and politics, maybe this Thanksgiving is a good time to ask some different questions regarding gratitude.

This Thanksgiving, change the preposition. Practice gratitude. Choose gratitude.

And finally, I want to close with a quote from the Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast, who is known worldwide for teaching gratitude.

I think this quote just says it all: "If you're grateful, you're not fearful. And if you're not fearful, you're not violent. If you're grateful, you act out of a sense of enough and not a sense of scarcity and you are willing to share. If you are grateful, you are enjoying the differences between people and you are respectful to everybody. And that changes this power pyramid under which we live."

Let's pray:

Adapted from [Grateful: The Subversive Power of Giving Thanks](#)

by Diana Butler Bass

GOD, there are many days we do not feel grateful.

When we are anxious or angry. When we feel alone. When we do not understand what is happening in the world or with our neighbors. When the news is bleak and confusing. When there are threats, injustice, violence, and war.

We struggle to *feel* grateful.

But this Thanksgiving, we *choose* gratitude.

We choose to accept life as a gift from you, and as a gift from the unfolding work of all creation.

We choose to be grateful for the earth from which our food comes; for the water that gives life; and for the air we all breathe.

We choose to thank our ancestors, those who came before us, for their stories and struggles; we receive their wisdom as a continuing gift for today.

We choose to see our families and friends with new eyes, accepting them for who they are.

We are thankful for our homes, whether humble or grand.

We choose to appreciate and care for our neighbors whatever our differences or how much we feel hurt or misunderstood by them.

We choose to open our hearts to those who dwell among us in the shadows of uncertainty and fear, recognizing their full dignity and humanity.

We choose to see the world as our shared commons, our home now and the legacy we will leave to the generations to come.

God, this Thanksgiving, we do not give thanks. We choose it.

We will make this choice of thanks with courage, knowing that it is humbling to say “thank you.”

We choose to open ourselves to your sacred generosity, aware that we live in an unending circle of gratitude. We all are guests at your hospitable table around which gifts are passed and received.

We will not let anything opposed to love take over this table.

Instead of giving into fear, we embrace grace, love, and the gifts of life at this table. In this choosing, and in the sharing of this meal, we are strengthened to pass gratitude on to the world.

Thus, with you, with all those gathered at this table, and with those at tables far distant, we pledge to make thanks.

We ask you to strengthen us in this resolve.

Here, now, and into the future. Around our family table. Around the table of our nation. Around the table of the earth.

We choose thanks. Amen.

Sources:

Diana Butler Bass, for all her thoughts and writings on gratitude.