

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling  
First Presbyterian Church  
November 23, 2025  
Luke 17:11-18

### **“In Defense of Thanksgiving”**

Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday. This was not always the case. Christmas used to be my favorite holiday. Even when my kids were very little and we went from welcoming Santa to being Santa, it was still my favorite holiday. There is nothing like the magic of celebrating Christmas with little children. But I no longer have little children in my house and through the years I’ve grown to appreciate the simplicity of Thanksgiving. There is no stress of decorating the house. Or purchasing gifts. There can be the stress of family! And there can be the stress of cooking a meal, especially for those who don't like to cook, but even that can be overcome. One can pick up a Thanksgiving dinner at Kroger or any nearby restaurant. One can even go to that restaurant and save him or herself the hassle of setting a table or cleaning your home for friends and family and invite whomever you want to invite. I like to set a table. And I like to bake. And thankfully I am married to someone who is a wonderful cook. So we take pleasure in the holiday and hosting family and friends.

But I have noticed lately that Thanksgiving has started to fall out of favor. Our day school hosted a family feast last Thursday. And I commented to the day school director that I remember my children's preschool used to host something similar. I also remember the children used dressed up as Indians and Pilgrims on such occasions. That, of course, has fallen out of favor, and with good reason. I think most of us know that the Thanksgiving story we learned in school is a myth. It is a myth that friendly Indians, Unidentified by tribe, welcomed the pilgrims to America, taught them how to live in this new place., sat down to dinner with them and then disappeared, handing off America to white people so they could create a great nation dedicated to liberty, opportunity, and Christianity. That, my friends, is a story about native people conceding to colonialism. For many of us,

this was the version we learned as children — a simple story that skipped over the real history and the real cost to Native peoples. That story has rightly fallen out of favor because it left out the truth. And yet I sometimes wonder if, in letting go of that myth (which I do support), we've also lost the one thing worth preserving: the reminder that we need a day set aside to give thanks.

Thanksgiving is the one day we intentionally set aside to give thanks.  
The only one.

I think this is why my personal pet peeve with the word "Friendsgiving" has gotten stronger as the term has gotten more popular. Please know: I have no issue with celebrating the day with friends. Some of our fondest memories are from the Thanksgivings we spent with dear friends in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, when we were newly married and couldn't get home. We have *wonderful* memories of those years.

But even then, they were Thanksgivings, not "Friendsgivings." My pet peeve isn't about spending the day with friends. It's that the word *drops* the "thanks," as if that part is optional.

But in today's world — saturated with blame and shame, where gratitude is in short supply and resentment runs wild — the "thanks" matters. Elie Wiesel once said that gratitude pushes against the tides of resentment and complaint. Rabbi Harold Kushner said, "Gratitude doesn't change the facts of your life, but it has the power to make your life more bearable, more meaningful, and more joyful.

And that's why gratitude matters so deeply this week.

But before I go any further, I want to say this:

I know Thanksgiving is not joyful or simple for everyone.

Some of you will sit at very quiet tables this year. Some will sit at tables marked by grief, estrangement, or distance. And all of us will sit at tables shaped by complicated histories we cannot ignore. So when I speak of gratitude today, I'm not asking anyone to pretend. I'm inviting us to hold *both truth and thanks* at the

same time — because gratitude doesn't erase reality. It helps us face it with humility and hope.

And it gives us a countercultural witness.

Saying "I'm grateful" is not only an act of faith; it's an act of resistance. It makes room for a fresh appreciation of God's renewing, saving grace.

*So when we talk about gratitude today, we're not talking about pretending the world is fine. We're talking about choosing a posture — a way of seeing — that allows God's grace to rise above the noise. Gratitude doesn't deny reality; it helps us meet reality with a different spirit.*

Because here's the thing. Gratitude gets easier the more we practice it. It's not an inborn trait that some have and others don't. Gratitude is 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.

So this week, as we look forward to Thanksgiving. Choose to practice gratitude. And not just on Thursday. But any day. Choose to say thank you. Be the 10th leper. Be the one out of nine who chooses to turn around and say thank you. Not because you must. But because you can. And because it is the right thing to do. The leper did not need to turn around and say thank you. Indeed, by doing so, he was actually going against what Jesus told him to do. Jesus said to the 10 lepers, go present yourselves to the priests. Because it was the priest who had to declare that the lepers were fully healed. So the nine who went ahead and did not turn around and say thank you, were doing just what Jesus told them to do.

But still., only one 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 emotion 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.” But nowhere 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 is not the same thing as through. Prepositions matter. Gratitude is not 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 so be the 10th leper. Practice gratitude. Turn around and say thank you. Not because you must. But because you may. You can. You should.

And as you do, remember where we began this morning. I told you I love Thanksgiving because I get to set a table and welcome people I love—and I *am* grateful for that gift. Not everyone can do that this year. Some will sit at very quiet tables. Some will sit at tables shaped by grief or distance. And all of us, in one way or another, sit at tables made possible by complicated histories we cannot ignore. That's why keeping the 'thanks' in Thanksgiving matters—not as a way of glossing over the truth, but as a way of holding it honestly. Gratitude makes room for truth. Gratitude keeps us humble. And gratitude helps us turn back, like that tenth leper, and say 'thank you' with clear eyes and open hearts.”

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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.