

Do We Still Give Thanks?

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Luke 17:11-19

Delivered on November 19, 2017 at Northminster Presbyterian Church in North Canton, Ohio

Danke, Gracias, Grazi, Merci, Obrigado, Gamsa, xiexie, thanks. It seems that every language in the world has a word for thank you. And not only does every language have a word for thanks, but it is one of the first words you learn whenever you learn another language. Part of the reason for this is because it is a basic part of good manners or etiquette to say “Thank you” when someone does something kind for you. But it is not just good manners to say “thank you”, it is also part of being a good and decent person. Not everything that is a part of manners or etiquette has to do with being a good person. If you talk with your mouth full and put your elbows on the table you are showing bad manners but that hardly counts against your being a good or decent person, but failing to say “thank you” for some kindness which is done for you counts against your being a good and decent person. And why? It risks nothing. It costs nothing to do it. It takes almost no effort. And for that reason if you have ever done some act of kindness for another person and they failed to go through this basic, effortless ritual of common decency you may have been left with a sense of shock and offense. And we can hear that shock and offense I think in Jesus’ words as we hear this story about him healing ten lepers, where only one comes back to him to say thank you. “Were not ten healed?” Jesus asks. “Where are the other nine?” Shock, offense. It probably helps to know that the leper in this story who did come back to say “thank you” was a Samaritan and probably one who never expected that the Jewish messiah would do some act of kindness for him, whereas the others in this story were Jews and may have thought they were entitled to Jesus’ healing. And, when you do some act of kindness for someone and they fail to say thank you, what they seem to be

saying to you is “You owe this to me, I deserve it. You’re only doing what you should have done for me.”

In this country, we have a holiday that is about the act of saying thanks, and in the past as I have reflected on the meaning of the holiday we are celebrating this Thursday, it occurs to me that there is something a little different about this holiday—something unique. Now, to explain what I mean, it seems to me that when we celebrate holidays, we really do one of two things. On one hand, we have days which are events, and on the other hand, we have days which are a remembrance of some event. What kinds of days are events? They are days when we do something or something happens. To give you an example of what I mean New Year’s Day is an event. Something happens on New Year’s Day, there is a change in the calendar as we begin a new year. A national day of prayer is an event. Something happens on a national day of prayer. We all get together and pray. Ash Wednesday is an event day. Something happens on Ash Wednesday. We begin a season of repentance and sacrifice in the season of Lent. These kinds of days when something happens we could say are event days or primarily event days. New Years Day, a national day of prayer, Ash Wednesday, all event days. Other days though, it seems are not event days, or not primarily event days, but remembrance days. On these kinds of days what we are doing is not making something happen, instead we are remembering something that happened. As Christians, on Christmas, we remember the day of that our Lord was born. Christmas is not an event day, it is a remembrance day. We don’t believe that our Lord is born every time we celebrate Christmas. Independence Day, or what we commonly call the fourth of July is a remembrance day. We remember the time that we declared independence as Americans. We don’t declare independence all over again every time we

celebrate Independence Day. So there are event days and there are remembrance days. And yet, what is it that we'll be doing this Thursday? Well, if you were to come here from a far off distant country and you knew nothing of our life, and someone told you that Americans have some holiday called *Thanksgiving*, what kind of day would you think that was? I don't know what you all would think, but I suppose that I would think that this Thanksgiving that people speak of must be an event day. It must be a time when we have some kind of celebration in which we express our thanks to God for all that God has blessed us with. And for all of us here, perhaps, that is what Thanksgiving is. It is an event. And it is an event which involves the expression of thanks.

But with enough reflection, I wonder if you would come to agree with me, when I say that as a nation this is not what we do when we celebrate Thanksgiving. We do not have an event day. Rather, what we have is a remembrance day. Just as we remember our Lord's birth on Christmas, or we remember the birth of our nation on Independence Day, on Thanksgiving we remember that first Thanksgiving back in 1621—that first Thanksgiving when the Pilgrims who had come over on the Mayflower, after a brutal first year in Plymouth Massachusetts which had cost the lives of more than half of them, took time in the autumn to have a feast with their native American friends and give thanks to God for all they had in their simple existence. Community, peace, friendship, family, life, and enough food to keep them nourished. For us as a nation, thanksgiving is a remembrance day, and in schools across this land during the month of November you can see children running through the halls in seventeenth century costumes dressed as either little pilgrims or little native Americans as they learn to take part in the remembrance.

But as I have just said, it seems that if you knew nothing at all about thanksgiving you would expect it to be an event day and so why is it a remembrance day? Well, I'm no expert on this subject, but I have done a little reading about this, and what I found out was that although Thanksgiving is a very old tradition in American life, it was not until around 1900 at the dawn of the 20th century when Thanksgiving started becoming associated with the remembrance of Pilgrims and Native Americans at Plymouth Massachusetts. There were many Thanksgivings before 1900 but these were actually event days, days to thank God for some blessing in our national life. In 1777 George Washington, then General Washington declared a day of Thanksgiving to thank God for recent victories over the British in the Revolutionary War, and President Lincoln did the same in 1863 to thank God for union victories in Vicksburg and Gettysburg. They weren't times to look back to the early 1600s. And so the question is, what happened to change all that?

Well, I don't really know what happened, but if I had to guess, then what I would guess is that Thanksgiving started to become a remembrance day, when an event of thanksgiving started to seem out of place in American culture. I would guess that Thanksgiving started to become a time of Pilgrim remembrance, when Americans suddenly woke up and realized that we had lost something that the Pilgrims had. They had lost this central belief that everything they had came from God, and the things which belonged to them did not really belong to them at all. They belonged to God and God, out of God's infinite love and goodness had only entrusted all the things they had to their care. Now, I don't know that the Pilgrims were people who were all perfect angels, and who remembered to give God thanks for every single thing they had. If I had to guess, I'd say they probably weren't. In many ways, I would guess they

were probably a lot more like the people of the beginning of the twentieth century than the people at the beginning of the twentieth century would have liked to think. But what is important is that at that point in our history, I think we as Americans looked around and discovered that we had lost something, and whether it was historically accurate or not, what we had lost became symbolized, it became embodied in the culture of the Pilgrims who landed on Plymouth Rock. After all, when we feel nostalgic about some time in the past, it really doesn't matter whether or not the time that we feel nostalgic about was really the way it is in our imaginations or not. The show *Stranger Things* is popular on t.v. now and I don't know if you've seen it or not, but when you watch it, you suddenly feel like you're back in the eighties. The hair, the make-up the clothes, the cars, the interior décor, it all looks just like the eighties. I don't know why people want to feel nostalgic about the eighties, if my memory serves, it seems like the eighties were pretty bland. But maybe you would remind me that there was also a sense of common decency people had in the eighties, where neighbors looked out for neighbors in their communities and everybody knew your name. Maybe you would remind me that it was a time when people in business treated you like more than just another customer. You could actually call some business and talk to a real person on the other end of the phone. Maybe you would tell me it was a time when you could watch something on television that wasn't absolutely saturated from one minute to the next with sex and violence. Or maybe you would tell me that you don't even know what it is, but somewhere along the way we have simply lost our innocence since then, it doesn't matter how bland or boring the eighties were.

Well, in the same way, I think that somewhere around the year 1900, people started feeling nostalgic about the Pilgrims, because they had a sense that they had lost something

somewhere along the way. Whether the Pilgrims were exactly the way they remembered them, I don't know and it doesn't matter. What does matter is that they had become a symbol of what was lost. And that's important, because at that time in our history, you would think that we Americans had the world on a string. The Westward Expansion of the 19th century had extended our living space all the way to the Pacific. In the Caribbean and the Pacific we were starting to build an empire. And on Ellis Island in New York, we were welcoming immigrant people from all over the world who came here seeking a better way of life. But still, amid all this success, Americans had a sense that something had been lost. Whatever attitude of thanksgiving we had toward God had been lost somewhere along the way.

Now, again, this is all speculation. Don't take what I say as being the final word on this matter. But I wonder, I really wonder if what happened with Thanksgiving was that it was a holiday that started as an event, it started as something we would do together as an act of thanksgiving to God, because in a more innocent time, that's who we were as Americans, we were a thankful people, and then it became a time of remembering an event, a time of remembering a thankful people because thankful we were no more. We had lost something.

And, if all this wondering and speculation is not completely off base, then this Thanksgiving, I want to remind us that it doesn't have to be that way. We can once again become a thankful people; a people who recognize that everything which we have belongs to God. We can choose whether we want to live as a consumer people who work ourselves to death to have more and bigger and better and faster, or whether we once again become a people who observe as Jesus tells us that God clothes even the lilies of the field and feeds even the birds of the air and that we can stop what we're doing at least one day out of the year to

say thank you to God as a way of recognizing that we have everything that we need and more not because of our own efforts but because of the goodness of God. We can choose whether we see our daily work not as a way of coming to have more and more and possess more and more, but as a way of taking care of this world and this life that God has given us because we are so thankful to God. And we can choose whether we see our neighbors as people who are in competition with us for resources that are scarce, and therefore people who threaten us, or whether we see them as people who are our responsibility to care for just as we are also theirs.

But why should we do this? Why should we become a thankful people and get back what we lost? Is it just to hold on to the past, and play make believe games about the seventeenth century? Well, no. We should get back what we lost quite simply because living the other way, living in a way that is thankless, and self-gratifying and consumer driven will not work. It won't work. They don't tell you it won't work in the commercials you see on the internet and on t.v. when they tell you that for your life to be complete you have to drive this car or you have to wear these clothes or you have to drink that soda, but it won't work. And in fact, I haven't heard a single person yet tell me that it works. What I have heard is people tell me that when they have spent their lives chasing after more and better and faster that they have missed out on life; that they have missed out on what really matters. What works is recognizing that God has already given us all we need for our lives to be complete and that is what we declare to each other and to all the world when we say thank you to God.

Thanksgiving has become a remembrance day, I believe because we suddenly recognized that we lost something as Americans. And it is for all of us to decide whether what we lost was worth losing, or if we had something as a nation that is worth going back to.