

"GROWING IN GRATITUDE"

INTRODUCTION

October and November both have a number of days on the calendar which crowd the present with some important events of the past. On Columbus Day, Veterans' Day, Reformation Day, All Saints' Day, and again on Thanksgiving Day, we live over once again the moments and the memories of the past. We think of those into whose inheritance we have entered. On Occasion it is well for us to do this. It's good for people to pause every now and then and look back over the road they have traveled. At times we tend to be a little casual with tradition; ~~perhaps~~ if we knew better than we do the lessons of history, our world might be less torn and troubled than it is.

We have come together this morning on this Sunday before our National Day of Thanksgiving to keep alive a tradition: to give thanks to God for His many blessings to us - as a people, as a nation - and to dedicate ourselves to the unfinished tasks of our time. Gratitude - this is the theme of today's sermon.

DEVELOPMENT

Dr. Sockman, for forty-four years the Minister of Christ Church, here in our own city, once suggested that ingratitude was one of the most popular sins in the world. By popular, he meant prevalent and widespread, rather than admired or well-liked. He observed in one of his books that "ingratitude is one of the worst crimes in the big-black catalogue of wrong-doing".

Luke, in his Gospel, gives one graphic scene which shows how common ingratitude can be. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. As He entered a village, He was accosted by ten lepers who stood at a distance and cried aloud: "Jesus... Master....have mercy upon us". When He saw them, He said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests". For Jewish lepers were required to report to the Temple priests in order to have their cure certified. And as they went, they were cleansed! "Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at the feet of Jesus, giving him thanks....thereupon Jesus said, 'Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' And he said to him (to the cured leper): 'Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well'".

According to Luke and his first century Gallup poll of the ungrateful, it ran according to his count as high as ninety per-cent. And it's doubtful that nineteen centuries have lowered this percentage. Human nature hasn't changed that much. Some modern day surveys of the ungrateful might put it even higher.

Church Staff After close to fifteen years of trying to help people in some small way who stop by the church here at all hours of the day and night seeking some form of assistance (usually financial), I am still waiting for the first one to come back and say "thank you". ~~Perhaps even pay back a loan or reimburse the church.~~ The reimbursement is unimportant to me; it's the ingratitude that bothers me on the part of people that we have helped around a difficult corner. Memories are so short. I thought I had my first one return last Spring to say "thank you". I had helped him out with some financial assistance last March. In early May he stopped by again. I was overjoyed at first to think he had come to express his appreciation. My spirit was lifted until he said, "I really came back to ask for more help. Can you give me another ten?"

WHY IS INGRATITUDE SO PREVALENT

Memories are short. We so easily forget the kindnesses or the help we have received from others in getting around a difficult corner of life. But there may be some other

beautiful garden that you and God have put together". To which the man replied, "Yes, preacher.....but you should have seen it when God had it all alone. It really wasn't much". I think this tendency to forget God and the blessings we have derived from his hand increases with the methods of modern living. More and more we are leaving the soil for the city, thus removing ourselves from the first-hand reminders of our dependence on God. Living and working as we do in the environment of man-made things, we forget so many of those forces of the natural world which are basic. ~~For instance - fertility.~~ A scientist has figured out that a farmer's effort is only about 5% of the factors which produce a crop of wheat. We city dwellers eat the bread without thoughts of the 95% which the Creator has contributed. The early Hebrew law-makers understood man's tendency to ingratitude. In the 8th chapter of Deuteronomy is this strong counsel to the pioneers of Israel:

"Take heed....lest when you have eaten and are full, and have built goodly houses and live in them.....and your silver and gold is multiplied....then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord is your God."

CULTIVATING GRATITUDE

"Gratitude" said Aesop, "is the sign of noble souls". How noble is your soul. And if it is less noble than it ought to be, how can the grace of gratitude be cultivated?

One suggestion might be a better use of the resources of memory. We can learn a bit of wisdom from the Persian ~~vizier~~ monarch who is reported to have had in his palace a room called "The chamber of memory" - in which he would spend one hour each day reminding himself of how much he owed to those who had gone before him. Some time spent in reflection - thinking about those who lived yesterday and who have helped us across many difficult days.

Henry Nelson Wieman once suggested that just as the devout Catholic has a string of beads called a rosary to keep track of his prayers, so each of us should make something of a mental rosary of our most precious memories - including the beauty one has seen, the fellowship and friendships one has enjoyed, the varied gifts which life has awarded one. We don't need visible beads, but we should run over those memories and give thanks to God for each separate favor. I think the suggestion has merit, for when we start to count our many blessings and to "name them one by one" as the hymn goes, we begin to rummage among our memories and we uncover so many forgotten reasons for gratitude.

We think of the sacrifices of our parents, the steadfast loyalty of good friends. Teachers, doctors and so many others who have by their concern and kindness made a difference in our lives.

Then we begin to think about those who helped to make this land a fit places in which to live. In early New England it was the custom at Thanksgiving to place five grains of corn at every plate as a reminder of those rigorous days in the Pilgrims first winter at Plymouth, when the food supply was so low that only five grains of corn were rationed to each person at a time. We do well to remember, too, that when the food supply was so low, there were only seven healthy colonists to nurse the sick and that half their original number lay in the windswept graveyard on the hill.

When our minds stir among our memories, we begin to feel gratitude for those blessings that we so often take for granted in this land - "so beautiful for

pilgrim feet, whose stern impassioned stress, a thoroughfare for freedom beat, Across the wilderness". It is well for us to remember that you and I reap the benefits of freedoms which are essentially Christian freedoms - born out of the sacrifices of people who yearned to see the Christian way of life find full fruition in this land.

MUST BE EXPRESSED However, I'm sure you will agree that it is not enough for us simply to call to mind our blessings. I think if gratitude is to grow in our hearts, then we must cultivate the expression of it as well as a consideration of the source of it.

If all of us were to spend less time in going over our grudges and gave more time to voicing our gratitude and acknowledging our appreciation, we'd be much better off. Take some time today to write those few lines to someone who ought to receive a grateful word from you. Don't put it off; do it today. Send a few lines in the direction of a public official who you feel is doing a good job. Think of how important the voicing of gratitude is in the marriage relationship. Someone has said: "Trying praising your wife once in a while; it will frighten her at first, but after a few days she will begin to enjoy it and respond to it". Sometimes we become careless in our relationships and take each other for granted. We assume that actions speak louder than words. They do, but on the other hand, works without words can spoil the harmony and cause that beautiful music between two people to sour. A silent Vermont farmer on his Golden Wedding Anniversary is reported to have broken into speech and said to his wife:

"Mary, I have loved you so much that sometimes I could hardly keep from telling you".

We come back to some words of Paul written to one of the early churches and we're reminded of how the early Christian faith was nurtured in the grace of gratitude:

"Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts....and be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual sounds with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word of deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus - giving thanks to God through him".

Ten lepers besought Christ to cleanse them. He did. Only one came back to praise him, to thank him. That grateful leper was not only made well, made whole, but across the centuries he has become a symbol of the grateful spirit. How true it is - that a person, a home, a nation, a church, a relationship - none of these can be made well, made whole, unless they also be grateful.

PRAYER Deepen, we pray thee, O God, our sense of gratitude. Greatful we are for life and for its many blessings. For homes, for parents, for children, for friendships. For our nation and for those who have helped to make her great, we give thee thanks. Help us to grow in the art of cultivating a sense of gratitude. For in the name and spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen