

22 November 2015

The Opposite of Thanksgiving
Proverbs 30:7-9; Matthew 21:33-44

Proverbs 30:7-9

*Two things I ask of you;
do not deny them to me before I die:
Remove far from me falsehood and lying;
give me neither poverty nor riches;
feed me with the food that I need,
or I shall be full, and deny you,
and say, 'Who is the LORD?'
or I shall be poor, and steal,
and profane the name of my God.*

Matthew 21:33-44

'Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'

Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.'

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One of the things I do each month is lead a few chapel services in senior apartments, assisted living facilities, and nursing homes, anywhere from two to four a month. This month, I led a service out at Forest Park Village in which, looking for a new way to approach the matter of thankfulness, I asked this question: "What is the *opposite* of thanksgiving?" Yes, I know: the answer is, "*un*-thankfulness." That was the first answer that the Forest Park congregation gave, too. Thank you, but not helpful. No, I mean, what are the things that we do, the attitudes we hold, the ideas we cherish that prevent us from being thankful? At Forest Park, we ended up talking about envy. As long as we are focused on what others have that we don't, or even on what others have and (in our estimation) don't deserve as much as we do, then we are unable to be grateful

for the blessings we have. That's what I talked about two weeks ago, but there were several other good thoughts that came out in our discussion – other things that just as effectively prevent us from being grateful. A complaining spirit, for instance. Some people dwell constantly on how bad they have things, and these people also cannot be thankful. But today I want to talk about a different barrier to thanksgiving: the conviction that we *deserve* everything that we have. We normally call this attitude: Entitlement.

Look back at the parable that we just read. Jesus tells of a landowner who plants a vineyard. He doesn't just plant it; he does all the work to make the vineyard fruitful – builds walls, digs cisterns for water, everything. Then he leases this perfect property to tenants, with the rent being a share of the crops at the harvest. Now I think we can all agree that this is fair. The landowner has done everything he could to make it possible for the tenants to have excellent crops. Yes, they have to do the work of keeping the vineyard and harvesting the grapes, but they only have that opportunity because the landowner did the prior work and graciously permits them to live in this good garden. So the landowner's within his rights to ask for a share of the produce, right? But the tenants evidently don't see it that way. All the preliminary work that the landowner did, that's ancient history. What matters is *now*, and they're the ones who did all the work of harvesting, while the landowner's off on vacation. Why should they share the fruit of *their* labor with that fat cat? After all, it's not like he needs it.

Entitlement. It is the conviction that everything I have I have earned. In fact, to be honest, I've really earned a whole *more* than I have, but I've been cheated out of it. The truth is, the world owes me. This attitude is only possible, though, if you are able to forget or ignore any gifts that others have given you, and all advantages you have that others don't. To the entitled soul, those things don't count. The attitude of entitlement makes gratitude impossible. And, I'm coming to believe, entitlement is the besetting sin of our society.

Now we hear the term entitlement most often in reference to people who live on government and charitable assistance, who evidently feel that they shouldn't have to work or do things that they don't enjoy, but instead are just owed their upkeep by society. Well, it's a real thing. There are people like that. We meet them occasionally in the Personal Needs Closet. Just a couple of weeks ago, when the closet was open, I stepped in to warn Karen Petersen and Ann Chopp, our volunteers that day: "Watch out. James is here: the guy who talks about how much he loves God and Jesus and will try to sneak extra stuff when you aren't watching." This past week, I spent half an hour on the phone with a homeless man who wanted the church to pay for a hotel room. He didn't *want* to go to the Warming Center; he doesn't like it. He wanted a hotel room. I told him no. So, yeah. This sort of entitlement is real. But for what it's worth, it's also incredibly rare. We've helped almost 300 families in the Personal Needs Closet this year, but I knew the con man by name, and Karen and Ann knew exactly who I was talking about. Why? Because there are only a few like him. The truth is, if you want to see what gratitude looks like, come volunteer at the closet. Come watch a young mother's eyes light up when her daughter sees the free children's books. And nearly every time, after the child has looked at *every* book, the mother says, "Only two. Leave some for other children. Now what do you say?" That's not entitlement.

But there are other sorts of entitlement in our society. Here's one I hear about from Karen Kellbach, our Accounting Supervisor, who also serves on the county board and city council. It's the entitlement of expecting police and fire service, immediate snow plowing and road repair, but you need to cut my taxes! If you don't have enough in the budget for all these things I expect, then pay for them by cutting waste somewhere else. I gather that "waste" in this context is "any city service that doesn't directly benefit me." That's entitlement, too. Who cares that I am only able to go to my job and earn my salary because of things that have been handed to me, paid for by others: you don't expect me to chip in what *I* worked for, do you? It's exactly the sort of entitlement that the tenants in the parable demonstrated.

A brief digression here. I don't like paying my property taxes either. I could think of a lot of things I could do with those thousands. But in my more sane moments, I'm glad to support our schools, our police and fire departments, and our road crews. In fact, I'd be willing to pay even more, if we could use it to subsidize decent public transportation. You know I serve on the Housing and Homelessness Coalition here in Wausau. Do you know the number one thing we could do to fight homelessness here? Run buses to Rib Mountain and the Industrial Park. That's where the jobs are, but if you don't have a car, it's hard to work there. Last winter, there was a gentleman who slept every night at the Warming Center, then got up at four each morning, because his job started at six, and it took him two hours to walk to work. In January.

By the way, that's not entitlement, either.

All right. End of digression. We now return you to our regularly scheduled sermon. My point is, that we as a culture have a problem with entitlement. We live in the safest and most comfortable society on earth, and as a group we all pretty much share the conviction that we deserve it. It's not an accident of birth. It's us. We've earned our privilege, somehow. So all those other people who don't have our privileges – refugees or sweatshop employees in Bangkok – well, there must be something wrong with them. That's entitlement, and among other things, that mindset cripples gratitude. It is the opposite of thanksgiving.

Every now and then, though, something happens to shake our sense of entitlement. September 11 did that, and in the days and weeks following that terrible day, we as a nation shone. I was proud of our people and our country. I was proud of our president. Yes, eventually politicians started using the tragedy for political advantage, and corporations started figuring out ways to turn a profit from it, but for a brief period, we forgot how special we were and remembered how much we need each other. And that Thanksgiving, we were thankful. We had a similar, if smaller, shock a couple of weeks ago when terrorists attacked Paris. Once again, our comfortable lives were shaken, and we were reminded how vulnerable we were. It's still too early to see how we will respond this vulnerability, but one option is that we'll remember to be thankful.

We are not that special, but we *have* been very blessed. We may have worked hard for what we have, but we have the good fortune to live in a place where hard work actually can make a difference. In fact, most of what matters most to us has simply been given to us: life, health, our families, the people we love and people who love us. We didn't earn any of that. We didn't *deserve* any of that. But we can be thankful.

One final word: I spent a powerful hour with one of our members this week. He told me about his service in Europe at the end of World War II. He fought in France and was a part of the army that freed Strassburg and that liberated one of the concentration camps. I asked him about that. He said quietly, "I've seen some bad things." But then he said, "But I've seen some good things, too. I choose to think about the good things." This week, you do the same, and be grateful. Happy Thanksgiving.