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**Title:** Looking Forward to Thanksgiving

**Date:** November 17 & 18, 2018

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**Scripture:** [Colossians 4:2-6](#)

**Text:** [Luke 17:11-19](#)

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I'm looking forward to Thanksgiving. I do so every year. It is one of my favorite holidays. There are a number of reasons. I like the food even though a typical Thanksgiving meal is a diet-busting, 4,500 calorie experience of gluttony. That's the average Thanksgiving feast; but, I was told by my father, "Randy, don't ever strive to

be average." So I'm afraid there have been many Thanksgivings when I wasn't average in my consumption. That's frightening given that fact that to burn 4,500 calories will take over 10 hours on a treadmill.

Americans rank Thanksgiving as their 2<sup>nd</sup> favorite holiday so you probably are looking forward to Thanksgiving too. At 96%, almost all Americans will celebrate with 45 million turkeys paying the price. That's a lot of turkeys and 73% say they are looking forward to having Thanksgiving leftovers in their refrigerator. I look forward to that too, which means multiple opportunities for another 4,500 calorie dining experience.<sup>1</sup>

There is another reason I look forward to Thanksgiving. It is a mini-break before the rush of the next month. Just like you, ministers have the extra time commitments of decorating and shopping and parties for Christmas. But we also have to prepare extra services, write additional sermons and take care of you. Pastoral needs go up during December. We sprint through this marathon month to Christmas. I look forward to Thanksgiving as the calm before the business schedule of Advent and Christmas.

Add to this the joy of a being with family around the Thanksgiving table, a joy that I always experience, and you can see why Thanksgiving is something I look forward to. You may have the same feelings. Food, family, and respite is definitely something to look forward to. And it may be something to consider when thinking about Thanksgiving. Anticipating Thanksgiving may give us a clue to what thanksgiving is really about.

Let me suggest that true thanksgiving is less about our circumstances and more about our relationship with God, a God who promises to be with us no matter what is going on in our lives. Thanksgiving should be about what we look forward to more than what we've been through. That bears repeating. Spiritual thanksgiving is forward-looking : it's future-oriented. It's not just centered in past circumstances.

If this strikes you as odd, consider this. The most intense moments of thankfulness are often not found in times of plenty, but when difficulties abound, when you've overcome a great loss or survived a great challenge. Think of the Pilgrims that first Thanksgiving. With half their number dead, they were without a country, but still, there was thanksgiving. Their gratitude was not for something but in something, in their relationship with God and anticipating the blessings to come.

It was that same sense of gratitude that led Abraham Lincoln to formally establish the first Thanksgiving Day in the midst of national civil war when the list of casualties seemed to have no end and our nation struggled for survival. Thanksgiving was forward-looking.

Our lesson today demonstrates the importance of looking forward to Thanksgiving as a way of discovering spiritual blessings. The starting place is ten men who had lost jobs, home and family, at least temporarily. Sometime in the previous year, they had become lepers.

In the first century, leprosy was a variety of skin diseases that people suffered from. It may or may not have been what we know as Hansen's disease, a really horrifying bacterial condition that causes hands and feet, arms and legs to deteriorate, decay and literally fall off. If you had that type of leprosy, you were going to lose your life. But leprosy in the first century was a variety of skin conditions from minor rashes to more serious infections. There is a whole list of them in the 13 and 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of Leviticus. Someone dealing with severe eczema or acne or even balding is different than someone dying from leprosy, but not in Jesus' day. All got lumped into the leper category and were declared both physically and ritually unclean.

Being physically and ritually "unclean" was far worse than the disease itself. It resulted in being shunned. Being "unclean" meant that you were "unacceptable" or "incomplete" both to other human beings and to God as well. "No one ...paralyzed in his feet or hands, or lame, or blind, or deaf, or dumb, or smitten in his flesh with a visible blemish..."<sup>2</sup> would be allowed into sacred settings because it was believed that holy angels were present. People with significant diseases and deformities were outsiders. Outcasts. They lost their job, family and faith community.

Lepers were the worst outcasts because they were believed to be contagious and thus were required to stay away from people. If anyone wandered near, they were to shout "unclean, unclean." We see this in the story when Luke says "As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" (Luke 17:12-13) It is hard to feed yourself if you can't make money and you can't go to the market. You are at the mercy of those you had pity on you, those who'd share some of their food and clothing to help you get by. "Jesus, we are having a hard time. Help us. Have mercy upon us."

Hear it for what it likely is. We jump to the conclusion that they knew who Jesus was and that they were asking for him to perform a miracle. There is nothing in this story that indicates that this is the case. They didn't fall down at his feet and shout at Jesus, like the demonic whom Jesus heals. They didn't reach out and touch the hem of his garment, like the woman who was healed from her hemorrhage. They didn't beg like Jairus, whose daughter was resuscitated by Jesus' touch. (Luke 8:22-56). They kept their distance and asked for mercy; likely they were asking for food. "Jesus, help us. Have mercy on us. Give us something to eat."

Instead of giving food, Jesus shows mercy. "When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." (Luke 17:14a) What exactly does Jesus do? The passage doesn't say that he healed them. In both Matthew and Luke, when a leper approaches Jesus and asks to be healed, "Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "...Be made clean!" (Matthew 8:3a) This story is different. He tells them to get permission from the priest to re-enter society, to be declared "clean." It happened all of the time. If your skin cleared up you went to the priest. He declared you clean. You presented an offering. You went back to family and work and worship. Jesus looks at the ten and says, "You guys look good to me. Go see the priests and get back to your lives. Put this behind you." He doesn't touch them; he doesn't even go near them and the passage does not say "he heals them." It simply says, "And as they went, they were made clean." (Luke 17:14b)

That's the end of the first story and when you look at it carefully and you put it within the context of Jesus ministry, you suddenly realize that this story has nothing to do with a miracle and everything to do with Jesus' heart for people. The ten lepers are symbolic of all of the people who were marginalized and living on the fringes of society. They were the disenfranchised, the nobodies.

When it comes to Jesus' ministry, nobody was a nobody. Nobody was cut off; nobody was out of bounds. Nobody is an outcast. The stunning thing here is that Jesus is standing against his entire religious tradition. He is

saying that the ritual and ceremonial laws aren't important issues before God. God accepts every person, regardless of his or her situation and invites them into community. When it comes to Jesus thanksgiving table, everyone is invited.

This is why the second story is tacked onto the first. You may have thought about it as one story but it is really the second story; at least, it is a second chapter. "Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice." (Luke 17: 15) We find out that this one is a Samaritan. I have shared with you before that we've don't really understand the implication of the phrase, "he was a Samaritan." Samaritans were despised by Jew. Descendants of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, who built their own temple on Mt. Gerazim. Jews had nothing to do with Samaritans because they believed their faith was heretical. Oddly, the Samaritans thought the same about the Jews. Two groups with the same faith traditions and parents who split around the time of the Babylonian exile. For the disciples watching the encounter and those hearing the story in the first century, they would have been absolutely, drop your jaw shocked, just like they were when Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. Now we have a second Samaritan story. It's shocking.

There is something else that is shocking. It says, "...when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? (Luke 17: 14-15a) The answer is of course, yes. Yes, they were made clean, but they weren't healed. You probably missed this and it is a big difference. Being made clean allowed them to re-entered society. They were over their disease. They could go back to their lives. But something profoundly different happened to the Samaritan. He wasn't just made clean, he was healed, spiritually. The word translated healed in this passage is often translated saved. So he turned around, praised God and thanked Jesus for blessing him for his salvation. It is why this second story ends with Jesus saying, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." (Luke 17: 19b) The healing opens him up to many future blessings. He now has a lifetime of looking forward to thanksgiving, the gift of his salvation.

Thanksgiving not just centered in past circumstances or blessings. It is forward-looking. Do you know the name Martin Rinkhart? Rinkhart was born a cooper's son in Eilenburg, Saxony. Rinkhart enjoyed a good education, eventually graduating from Leipzig in theology. Like the other Martin, Martin Luther, Rinkhart was a good musician and entered ministry as a Lutheran cantor, then as a deacon in Eisleben. In 1617, he returned to his home as archdeacon of Eilenburg.

The next year, the horrors of the Thirty Years War began. At one and the same time, Eilenburg was a good place to be and a bad place to be. It was a good place to be because it was a walled city that became a refuge for the war-ravaged population. It was a bad place to be because, in a fortified city, a disease can run rampant. For some time, Rinkhart was the only pastor in Eilenburg because the others had fled or died. It is reported that in 1637 a great pestilence swept through the city that left 8,000 dead, including Rinkhart's own wife. In the midst of his own grief, Rinkhart conducted nearly 5,000 funerals, sometimes leading as many as 40 or 50 per day. At the end of the war, Rinkhart did something that was amazing. He published a hymn, one that the church has sung for centuries since. You may know it.

Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices,  
Who wondrous things has done, in Whom this world rejoices;  
Who from our mothers' arms has blessed us on our way  
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

How can a man who had lived through not one bad year but 30 awful, painful, tragic years write something like that? How could he be thankful? He understood that true thanksgiving isn't about what we have or the circumstances of our life. It is about our relationship with God, a God who promises to be with us no matter what is going on in our lives. It is why we should always look forward to Thanksgiving.

Since Thanksgiving is nearly upon us, let me offer this suggestion. This year, be thankful not just for what has happened in the past. Be thankful for a God who is with us, no matter what the circumstances, good or bad. Be thankful for a God who chases us with Jesus and invites us to cry out to Him for healing, for salvation. Approach your Thanksgiving table with gratitude not for our circumstances, whether they be wonderful or challenging, but for God's involvement in the middle of it. It might change your perspective and in fact, you too might begin to look forward to Thanksgiving, not just the day, but to a lifetime of gratitude.

It is my hope that you can begin a lifetime of forward-looking to Thanksgiving even as it is my hope and prayer that you have a Happy Thanksgiving.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://wallethub.com/blog/thanksgiving-facts/28332/>

<sup>2</sup> J. Jeremias, D. Zersen, trans., *The Theological Significance of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, St. Louis: CPH, 1968, p. 13.