

Thinking About Thanking  
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2 Corinthians 9:6-12, 15

It's almost Thanksgiving. Just a few more days to shop, clean, arrange, pack, cook or whatever it is you need to do to get ready. I've got butternut squash to peel and cook and place cards to make with my son.

But am I ready to give thanks? Thanksgiving is after all an action word, as well as a noun. We are to be giving thanks, thanks-giving, on this day. A harder task than mashed squash side dish.

Are you ready to give thanks? Ready for your thanks-giving? Hmmm....

Thanksgiving is a complicated holiday

In one sense it is my favorite

There are no gifts

It centers around food and I love to eat

My family tradition includes a walk between dinner and dessert, usually to the ocean, where stand around freezing and take a group picture.

I live in Plymouth so in some ways I live within a historical tradition of Thanksgiving all the time. I drive by Plimoth plantation every day. I walk by Plymouth rock. We worship here in a Congregational church, a church whose roots trace back to those very Pilgrims who arrive at Plymouth to seek a new life and religious freedom. This is our story.

But I am also very aware of the harm the sanitized Thanksgiving story does when we don't consider what it meant for an invading group of people to arrive carrying diseases for which Native peoples had no immunity and open the door for others to forcibly take land from the inhabitants. This is our story too.

Add to this the reality of sitting down to a big dinner with relatives we sometimes don't see very often and perhaps don't see eye to eye with, thanksgiving is complicated.

So I have been thinking about thanking.

Why do we give thanks?

Well, there is a very practical reason. Did you know that giving thanks, gratitude, is good for you?

It is scientifically proven that people who give thanks and take time to express their gratitude are sick less often, have stronger immune systems, lower blood pressure rates, and lower rates of depression. They also sleep better. Gratitude is a safe and free sleep aid. [happierhuman.com](http://happierhuman.com)

A five-minute a day gratitude journal can increase your long-term well-being by more than 10 percent. That's the same impact as doubling your income!

Gratitude makes us nicer, more trusting, more social, and more appreciative. As a result, it helps us make more friends, deepen our existing relationships, and improve our marriage. (happierhuman.com)

My goodness, it is a perfect life fix! It solves everything. Where has it been all my life? Well, right here of course.

From a purely secular point of view we should be thankful. But our Christian tradition gives us somewhere to deliver our thanks. We offer thanks to God, the creator of all things. And to Jesus, whose words to us and loving teaching help us live more fruitful, richer lives.

And when things are difficult, even then we can offer thanks for some small miracles or moments in our daily lives that make getting to the next moment, living from moment to moment a little bit easier.

Scottish minister Alexander Whyte was known for his uplifting prayers in the pulpit. He always found something for which to be grateful. One Sunday morning the weather was so gloomy that one church member thought to himself, "Certainly the preacher won't think of anything for which to thank the Lord on a wretched day like this." Much to his surprise, however, Whyte began by praying, "We thank Thee, O God, that it is not always like this." Daily Bread, August 26, 1989.

Yes, even in the excruciating times we can thank God that it is not always like this.

In the midst of difficulties that lie out of our control, gratitude is very much in our control. We can offer thanks and thanksgiving and no current situation can derail that.

You see, gratitude is not rooted in happiness. It may create happiness but happiness is not the source for gratitude. We can be grateful even in terrible times. In fact, practicing gratitude matters even more when everything is awful

"For God's righteousness endures through the ages," says Paul. And that means God is very much here with us.

Anne Lamott, writer and casual theologian writes, "When my priest friend Tom is at his most despondent over [the presidency] and global warming, he goes around his neighborhood picking up trash and dog [poop]. It definitely helps on days when you can't see much hope for this sweet old planet. In the long haul, grace will win out over everything, over the misery, the stupidity, the dishonesty." — Grace (Eventually), Anne Lamott

Why give thanks?

It is an antidote to the cycle of want, want, want. I imagine your mailboxes look a bit like mine-crammed with circulars filled with pictures of stuff and more stuff and more stuff. Years ago my family decided to participate in Buy Nothing Day as an alternative practice to Black Friday and its consumerism hype. But my mailbox doesn't know that. So the parade of junk mail continues.

Gratitude for what we have cuts through the wants and enables some space for contentment with what is, thanks for all that is in our lives, material and otherwise. You cannot simultaneously hold discontent and gratitude in your mind. Try it. It just doesn't work. This is why Paul says, "God loves a cheerful giver." For an un-cheerful giver is really just someone acceding to extortion. Gratitude, thanksgiving, opens us up and allows giving to flow from us.

In my house over dinner we have a nightly practice. Each person has to answer these three questions:

What was your rose today--something good that happened

What was your thorn today--something bad that happened

What is your bud--something you are looking forward to

When we started this it was easy in the beginning. "Oh, it's great to be together." "Oh, I'm sad that grandpa couldn't come to dinner." "I'm looking forward to Saturday."

My son used to say, "Oh I am so grateful for this yummy dinner!" It was gratifying the first time. Not so much the 10th time when it was clear the response was just an easy answer as he was pushing whatever we were having around the plate instead of eating it.

But over time this tradition has become more than that, a more difficult practice.

What am I truly grateful for today?

There are the big banner days like when a student of mine becomes a US citizen or passes their GED. The smaller victories like finally getting off that thank you note or debugging my computer.

And the significant personal gratitude: a family member finally getting a job, a clear mammogram, that so far the coup in Zimbabwe is not violent as I still feel deeply connected to southern Africa.

There is a lot in our world to be disturbed by, frightened of, or angry about. And we can get caught in those cycles of distress and despair. There is a lot in our own lives that is difficult--plenty of thorns: Alzheimer's, money problems, addiction.

There are things at Pilgrim we can worry about: a smaller congregation, the departure of the last pastor, the reality of the decline of mainline churches, a smaller Christmas pageant.

Gratitude does not deny those realities. But offering thanks does change our perspective and it changes us.

You know what I am grateful for at Pilgrim?

Your roof doesn't leak!

I served a church where my interview was held in a room that had a steady drip-drip-drip into a bucket behind my chair. I finally learned that it was the roof leaking and, yes, it had been like that for years and, yes, they wanted me to help fix it.

You know what else I am grateful for at Pilgrim?

You want to do the work to learn about and more deeply grow into being a healthy, faith-filled church. You all are committed to being here and ready to do the work of this interim time and ultimately welcome and work with new leadership, a new pastor. But in this time together, you all and me here together, you are present and ready to do what we need to do together. That's great.

For gratitude, thanks giving gives us another gift of perspective. It helps us celebrate the present. We can't be grateful for something that hasn't happened yet--this keeps us from spending whole lives future focused.

And it asks us to engage in our present. We are not usually giving thanks for things that happened 10, 20 or 50 years past, but for what is in front of us right now. Not the church of the founding members or the church of Judy Brain or the church of the large church school, but gratitude for the Pilgrim we are, right now, in this moment.

Finally, what I really like about the last part of today's scripture, is that our thanks, our giving, spills out to other people. Gratitude is catching. Paul says your generosity will spill over in all directions. The more grateful we are we, the more we feel we can give--of our time, of our money, of our presence. And the more people around us will see us--giving--offering thanks--thanks giving. And they will be touched by it and grow in their openness, their gratitude, their giving. And their thanks-giving.

As Paul writes "God is ready to overwhelm you with more blessings than you could ever imagine so that you'll always be taken care of in every way and you'll have more than enough to share."

Meister Eckhart, a 13th century mystic and theologian, wrote, "If the only prayer you say in your life is 'thank you,' that would suffice."

And so, God, we are here with gratitude. Thank you. Amen.