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Thank you ... pass it on!  
Martin Grove United Church  
October 16, 2016  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Jeremiah 29:1,4-7 and Luke 17:11-19

I need to start this morning by asking a really important question. What's your favourite section in the newspaper? Whether you read an actual paper or use a tablet, what section do you most look forward to reading? My current morning ritual involves reading the news on my phone - sharing news articles back and forth with Marjorie as we eat together. If I ate a more elaborate breakfast I would read more news sources, but I always include the CBC News and the Russia Today in my morning nutrition. I enjoy local news, Canadian news, and global news. But I never cease to be amazed that I often learn the most about humanity, social dynamics, and the human condition from the business section of the news.

I should not be surprised of course. Businesses need customers to survive, and businesses that survive need to respond to the needs of other people. So of course business news must - at some level - be a reflection of the human condition - at least for those humans who have money!

For example, has anyone noticed that - for the past couple of years anyway - that automobile sales have been in a general slump. Riveting stuff, right? And I'm not even a car guy. But I recently read an article that made the bold claim that young people are simply not as interested in having cars - or even driver's licenses - as older people. For some of us not-so-young-anymore people - you know who you are - cars have been important symbols of independence and freedom, not to mention that cars used to be an important status symbol. Getting your driving licence and your first car were rites of passage for many of us. I got my "learner's licence" the day of my 16th birthday, and I imagine many of you did too.

But according to a recent article in The Star, "The elusive Gen Y crowd (often considered to be people born in the 1980s and 1990s) would rather socialize on their computers and smartphones than drive over to a friend's house the way mom and dad

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liked to do in their day” “While boomers continue their love affair with the automobile, their tech-driven offspring would rather get from point A to point B on their smartphones, which has car makers in a tailspin. ... Kids don’t love cars the way their parents do, and smartphones are replacing some of the social elements that a vehicle used to fill” In fact, “a whopping 46 per cent of drivers aged 18 to 24 in the U.S. said they would choose Internet access over owning a car”

It’s hard to imagine that the great tradition we call our addiction to the automobile is evolving and changing. We all understand that traditions change over time, but surely not deeply held religious symbols like cars! What is the world coming to if we change our image of cars from symbols of freedom, control, and independence, and start seeing cars as simply tools? It boggles the mind.

Another tradition that I believe is changing is Thanksgiving - perhaps not the meal itself, but the meaning behind it.

*[what do you think? What is thanksgiving to you?]*

Personally, I believe that our whole notion of gratitude is changing. I’m even a bit confused about the “point” of thanksgiving. Don't we feel grateful every day? Don't we express our gratitude to our friends and families all the time? Well of course - the answer is that generally we do not. I don't believe that we live in a society that is dominated by feelings of gratitude. What do you think? When you walk down the street do you feel surrounded by expressive voices of gratitude? Or do we generally hear more complaining than we do thankfulness?

Personally, I associate our disinterest in feeling grateful to the decline in the importance of religion in our lives. 60 years ago when mainline churches experienced our maximum membership, people were fed messages of gratitude by churches on a regular basis. But since those days, church membership has declined across the board, and I don't think people hear a message of gratitude nearly so often.

By the way, I personally have no problem with the decline in religious authority in Canada over those decades. In many cases that sense of authority was mis-directed. I

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am glad that I live in a society where people are allowed to look for spiritual nurture wherever we like. Even in my professional ministry - temperamentally I feel well-suited to ministry in today's social and church conditions. I don't feel I would have wanted to be in professional ministry during the heyday of the church.

My concern about our society moving away from the authority of the church is more a question of what is was that we moved towards. And I should not speak too highly of the influence of the authority of the church 50 years ago. We have not only moved away from the authority of the church, but also the authority of government bodies. In fact, we have largely moved away from following authority of any kind! But what is it that our society has moved towards?

*[ask - what has society moved towards]*

I believe that in general terms, we have moved towards more individuality, more self-reliance, more self-authority. There are many good aspects of that social change of course. But I think in that transition we have also suffered loses. In particular, we have lost much of our sense of gratitude. Why is that? Is it because as a society we no longer thank God for things we used to thank God for. Is it because we feel that what we have worked for things ourselves and we only have ourselves to thank? Is it because we simply don't appreciate the things in life that we believe we are entitled to. And we believe that we are entitled to quite a lot!!

And what do we think of our gospel story? The story that is usually called "Jesus heals ten lepers". In the story, Jesus cures ten lepers. And of those ten, only one of them takes the time to find Jesus to thank him. How do we read that story? Do we think that the nine people who did not return to thank Jesus were ungrateful? Were they just so anxious to return to their normal lives, their families, friends, and communities that they just bolted? Do we imagine that their failure to find Jesus was because their deep gratitude overpowered their need to show their gratitude?

There is another option. Perhaps the story should not be called "Jesus heals ten

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lepers” but should instead be called, “Jesus cures ten lepers and heals one outcast” Ten lepers were cured. But I would argue that only one leper was healed, because only one of them seemed to have been healed. A healed person feels connected. A healed person feels wholeness. A healed person feels and expresses gratitude. The person who was healed was healed from his sense of isolation, caused not only by his leprosy but also but the fact that he was a Samaritan, and therefore shunned by the Jewish community.

All ten were cured. Only one was healed. And that healing came - at least in part - because the man chose to find Jesus and express his gratitude to him. Expressing gratitude was part of the healing. Expressing gratitude was part of the whole experience of being grateful.

The youtube channel “SoulPancake” did a social experiment on gratitude. And they discovered that what makes people happy is not having stuff. What makes people happy is not even being grateful. What makes people happy is expressing that gratitude. (the video clip is here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHv6vTKD6lg>). It’s important to express our gratitude to others. Maybe that’s why our holiday is called “Thanks-giving”. It’s not not “Thanks-getting”. It’s “Thanks-giving”.

So this year - for Thanksgiving - we are all going to express our gratitude to someone else. Take a moment and consider who you want to express gratitude to - and for what. Then take a moment and start to write your expression of gratitude to that person. You don't need to finish the letter here and now, but I encourage each of us to start now with the paper provided, and please finish it today if possible. Or send an email - today!

*[short time to start letter-writing]*

Thanksgiving will be meaningful for us, because we will all supply that meaning. By expressing our gratitude, we have already begun. And as we express our gratitude to others, we will find our own healing.

*Amen.*