
Thanksgiving, not Thanksbeing
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
October 9, 2022
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 21:21-26 and Matthew 22:15-22

Happy Thanksgiving! Thanksgiving feels like such a simple celebration. Stick a turkey in the oven, and give thanks. Nice and simple. At least if you are not a turkey. Personally, I go back and forth on whether or not it is easy or difficult to say something meaningful on Thanksgiving Sunday. It might be hard for me to say anything that you have not already heard before. But I will try.

Today is also the final week in our 5-week series on stewardship. And the theme for the last week in the series is ... wait for it ... “thankful”. And of course, we have another special guest lined up for today. More on that later.

Thanksgiving is a made-up word of course, intended to convey the notion of “giving thanks”. And giving thanks seems to be a fairly natural thing for many people.

[image: thank you sign]

Beyond the obvious of thanking store clerks, I cannot get on a bus without thanking the driver. When I used to participate in demonstrations at Queen’s Park in Toronto, I went out of my way to thank the security and police for their help creating a safe environment. I regularly thank many people in this church - although too subtly for some of you. At funerals I thank people for attending. At internments I always thank the cemetery workers who do so much behind the scenes to help families find comfort. Even when I keep my mouth closed, I notice lots of expressions of gratitude. And that’s perhaps the first secret about gratitude - we see more of it when we stop talking and listen.

But to begin, what does the expression “thank you” mean anyway? Is it just an expression that we use thoughtlessly that carries no real meaning, like “have a nice day”, or “nice shirt”, or “you look good - have you lost weight”? In our society we say quite a few things that don’t really mean anything. Is “thank you” one of those expressions? Or is “thank you” like the magic word - “please” - that means absolutely nothing except that

we agree to the social contract that we are expected to use the word? What does “thank you” mean anyway? What does gratitude mean anyway?

I think I know where part of the confusion comes from. And here’s the good news - we can all blame our parents for this. We were raised to think that saying “thank you” is something we do for the benefit of another person, the person being thanked. And, that’s true to a certain extent. When we ourselves are thanked for doing something, that always feels good, doesn’t it? But science has proven that saying “thank you” affects the speaker far more than it affects the listener.

[image: balloons]

Science - OK, The Internet, and that’s a close second - says that expressing gratitude gives the speaker many benefits, including: more patience, improved relationships, better sleep, an easing of symptoms of depression, and happiness that lasts. Wow. Happiness. How did that get in there? Isn’t happiness the one thing that all people really want? How can gratitude possibly lead to happiness?

[image: black friday]

Besides, as we all know, happiness comes from a store, right? Happiness comes from comparing my life to your life and deciding that I am winning. Happiness comes when my phone is cooler than your phone - and by the way, it is! Unless you are Carol - because Carol and I have the same phone. Happiness comes from the accumulation of stuff, doesn’t it? And when I get enough cool stuff then I’ll be happy. The only people who think there is another source of happiness are poor people, right? We all know that gratitude comes from having stuff, and I’ll be grateful - after I get my electric car. But by then I’ll probably need a new computer too, and by the time I replace my computer I’ll probably need a new phone. But THEN I’ll be happy and I promise you, I will be grateful. For at least a week. I promise!

Sorry about that. Somehow I channeled into the spirit of consumerism for a moment. But it’s only natural. It’s natural for all of us. Our desire to fit in is very strong. And we think that fitting in will lead to happiness. And “fitting in” in a consumer culture means wanting stuff. Please congratulate yourself for being normal.

[image: grateful]

I did not want to leave our discussion of gratitude as theoretical. So I have decided to give you something to be grateful for. Some of you may have noticed that for the previous 4 weeks we have had the same Bible reading from 2 Corinthians. I used the same text every week because the UCC program on which our stewardship series is based used that text every week. I repeated it because I wanted to see if any of you noticed. Only Darrell told me that he had had enough of that passage. So now, in the 5th week, I want to explain the text.

In the passage in 2 Corinthians, Paul is encouraging people to donate money to another church in Jerusalem. In 2 Corinthians, Paul never makes it clear why they need the money. The UCC materials lead us to believe that the church in Jerusalem was suffering due to a famine. But in Acts 21, we get the actual story.

[image: church fathers]

We have to remember that the very early church was composed entirely of Jewish people who believed that Jesus was their messiah. Over time, the early church expanded geographically. That expansion led to non-Jewish people becoming part of the early church. The church in Corinth would have been comprised of non-Jewish people, while the church in Jerusalem was made up of Jewish people. Paul was Jewish himself. But Paul supported the expansion of the early church to include non-Jewish people. The leaders of the church in Jerusalem had been accusing Paul of walking away from his faith. And so to prove his loyalty, Paul collected donations from the church in Corinth to give to the church in Jerusalem to prove to the church in Jerusalem that Paul was still loyal to the Jewish branch of the early church.

[image: corinth]

So the donations Paul was raising for the church in Jerusalem were not about helping poor, suffering people. The donations were used to settle a rift between Paul and the Jewish community. The donations were used for political points, not for helping poor people. Perhaps Paul was the original televangelist after all!

So you can thank me now for saying at least one thing that you probably had not heard before on a Thanksgiving Sunday. And you can thank me for not reading the passage from 2 Corinthians for a fifth time. You're welcome.

Right now, I would love to invite our guest speaker to join me in conversation. Unfortunately, our guest - Bob MacMillan - is currently quarantining due to COVID. But we will invite him back when it is appropriate. I do not want to miss out on his words of wisdom. And he told me that he wanted to have an actual dialog with me where he and I disagree about something. So that will be worth waiting for. And I hope you are resting well, Bob.

[image: happiness does not make us grateful, being grateful makes us happy]

So let us instead return to something much closer to the topic at hand. Gratitude. Or thankful. Or the giving of thanks. And again - what is the relationship between happiness and gratitude.

I invite us to consider the wisdom of Brother David Steinel-Rast¹, a Catholic Benedictine monk. He questions the idea that happiness leads to gratitude anyway. He invites us to think of the people we know who have all the ingredients we think are required for happiness, and yet these people are bitter and unhappy people. And think of the people you know who have serious life challenges, and yet these people are the personification of gratitude and seem to enjoy a great deal of happiness. The simple truth we all know is that gratitude leads to happiness, not the other way around.

Grateful living is when we accept the essential truth that each moment is a gift. Think about this moment - right now. You did not earn it. It is a gift given to you. Each moment is a gift. Do we have the capacity to recognize and to be grateful for that gift? Do you believe that opportunity only knocks once, and if you miss it it's gone? Well, perhaps that one opportunity is gone forever. But every moment there is another opportunity, and we are free to avail ourselves of that moment, of that opportunity. And that one. And that one. It is never too late to start being grateful because you can start right now.

Brother David summarizes his teachings about gratitude in a simple way I would like to share. Remember when we were children and we were told how to cross a street. We were told to stop, look, and then go. Brother David's advice for grateful living uses the same 3 steps.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UtBsl3j0YRQ>

[image: stop sign]

First, stop. We cannot reflect on our lives if we are running around like chickens all the time. Make intentional time for yourself. Pause. Relax. Breathe.

[image: binoculars]

Then, look. Look into your own heart. Reflect on your life. Relish the gifts you have received. Look at the new opportunities for gratitude all around you even now. Realize that you are loved. You are blessed. You are a gift.

[image: go brantford]

Finally, go. Feeling grateful is great-ful. But gratitude also needs to be expressed. We need to act. We need to actually do something to express our gratitude. Each of us can decide if that means you need to verbally express gratitude, or you need to write a note, or perhaps you just to move yourself to a space where you can more fully experience gratitude. Perhaps you want to act out your gratitude in service to others. In any case, gratitude involves action. And don't forget to be grateful to yourself at least some of the time.

Stop. Look. Then go and express your gratitude in action.

[image: finding happiness]

Not only does happiness NOT come from a store, it is generally not something that you can find anyway. Happiness is something that each of us creates for ourselves. And the simplest way to create happiness is to express gratitude to others. Gratitude is like the mental health equivalent of a green smoothie. And just like that smoothie, it doesn't do much good for you while it sits in the glass. You need to drink it. And with gratitude, we need to act.

The holiday today is called "Thanksgiving", not "Thanksbeing". It's not enough to be grateful. We need to act on it. Express your gratitude and find happiness and healing.

Amen.