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Thanking and Being Thanked

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Our scripture reading this morning is the gospel lection for today, along with the immediately preceding verses which are the latter portion of last week's reading; we didn't hear them then because of using a different text for our World Communion Sunday observance. Today's reading comprises two separate stories, the first a teaching that Jesus offers about giving and not giving thanks, and the second an encounter Jesus has with a group of people suffering with a skin disease, one of whom is thankful. Both of these passages appear only in Luke's gospel, and each has an edge to it, and it might or might not surprise some of us that either edge is found in scripture. It appears that Luke put these two teachings together because they both deal with thanksgiving. However, their messages also appear to move in opposite directions, which in my view, makes it all the more important to read them together in order to try to figure out what it means to live lives of thanksgiving. Jesus' teachings, more often than not, are more both/and than either/or, and usually have a twist designed to get us to think more deeply about the issue at hand. Two weeks ago, I posited that hope is an indispensable part of Christian life and practice. This morning, I add thanksgiving to the list of Christian (and human) essentials. But as was the case with my musing about hope, this morning I'm going to suggest that what thanksgiving is all about may be more complex than we often think, and I invite you to join me in exploring questions about what it means to give and receive thanks, and to live thankful lives. Now that I've prepared you to expect the unexpected, let's turn to the 17th chapter of Luke's gospel and encounter the challenges of the text. It opens with Jesus talking:

Luke 17: 7-19, New International Version:

⁷“Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will you say to the servant when he comes in from the field, ‘Come along now and sit down to eat’? ⁸ Won't you rather say, ‘Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink’? ⁹ Will you thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? ¹⁰ So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’”

¹¹ Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy[a] met him. They stood at a distance ¹³ and called out in a loud voice, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!” ¹⁴ When he saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were cleansed. ¹⁵ One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. ¹⁶ He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? ¹⁸ Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?” ¹⁹ Then he said to him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.”

Are you feeling overworked and underappreciated? Do you feel as if you are sufficiently thanked for the effort you exert, or not? Do you receive appropriate acknowledgement for a job well done, or do you wonder if anyone noticed? Are you offended by the story that Luke tells us Jesus told about worthless servants who don't deserve, and shouldn't expect thanks? Can you identify with the reaction Jesus had when only one of the people with a skin ailment that he helped

bothered to thank him? And, if Jesus' self-description of his mission is that he came to serve, not to be served, why was he unhappy that the other nine utter no thanks? Wasn't he just doing his Christ like duty that he had just told his hearers they should be doing?

What do we make of this? Is it important to give and receive thanks, or not?

Sit with these questions for a moment while I ask another. Did you grow up learning the "magic words?" Show of hands? I did. What are they" (please and thank you) I thought maybe this is a generational thing, that only old people know the magic words, so I asked one of my daughters if she remembered learning them when she was a child, and she did, although I am fairly certain she didn't learn them from her parents! In preparation for this morning, I investigated the origin of this "magic words" label, and I came up empty. I did discover, however, that Barney the Dinosaur and his friends sang a song about them. Did you know that? It starts out:

"There are lots of things we can do to be nice, and sometimes they're hard to remember, but there are two little things you should never forget from January through December... we're talking about please and thank you they're called the magic words. If you want nice things to happen, they're the words that should be heard."

Are "please" and "thank you" magic words? Should they be viewed this way?

Most of us, I think, would agree that please and thank you are words that make social interactions more pleasant, and some commentators decry the decline in their usage and how the decline has made contemporary existence coarser and less friendly. I think that's true. I mean, who doesn't like feeling appreciated? Might that be what was going on with Jesus when he reflected on not hearing from 90% of those he helped? And if feeling appreciated is important, it's not so just for Jesus, of course. Fundraisers will tell you that there is nothing more important than thanking your donors if you want the contributions to continue to flow.

This morning, I am wearing a stole that was a surprise gift from the Native Ministries Committee at the church I served in Juneau, Alaska. They commissioned its creation by a Native weaver, and its intricate art and beadwork are incredible; they gave it to me during worship the last Christmas I was with the church, and they left me speechless save the one word I could utter: Gunalchéesh! Gunalchéesh. Gunalchéesh" is the Tlingit word for "thank you," and not only is it an extremely important word in Tlingit culture; it is the one Tlingit word that virtually all people in Juneau, Native and non-Native alike, know, whether or not they can say anything else in 'Lingit.

It was the writer Anne Lamott who said when it comes down to it, there are really only 2 prayers – "help me, help me," and "thank you, thank you." I come pretty close to agreeing with her. And, if you do, about now you might praying, "Lord, the preacher should be prayin' "help me" instead of jawing on about "thank you," but stay with me. I want to fold all this talk of saying thank you back into our consideration of the scripture lesson from Luke. How does our text square with what I am claiming about the importance of giving thanks? Does it support it? Or not?

Look again at the first portion of our reading. Why would Jesus say such a thing about not thanking "worthless servants," given how valuable a "thank you" can be? (We might also ask,

“did Jesus really say it, or, since this only appears in Luke, did Luke put these words in Jesus mouth?”)

You see, Luke was written primarily to wealthy Galileans. He wrote for Theophilus, his benefactor, and Theophilus’ friends. These are people who had servants. Is Jesus, then, just accepting that this is the status quo – that some are destined to be masters, and others bound in servanthood or slavery? Is Jesus oblivious to what this must sound like? Perhaps not. Perhaps Luke’s Jesus is intentionally shocking the well-off hearers of the story, thereby exposing their cavalier denial of the personhood of those they have bound or enslaved. Perhaps it is the occasion for them to face the consequences of their actions and attitudes, as Jesus zaps them with, and you are just a “worthless” as they are.

Now, it is true that some need to hear words of appreciation because they have been so unappreciated for so long, and I don’t want to dismiss the importance of cultivating healthy self-esteem. And, perhaps, Luke’s Jesus was successful in shaming the first audience and forcing them to face how inhumanely they treated those who worked for them.

But on another level, what the teaching starkly forces all of us, regardless of station in life, to confront is the deficit in viewing our relationships as transactions where the reason we do something is for what we get out of it – only doing anything if we are rewarded, and if we are thanked. There is nothing wrong with wanting to be appreciated, but when it becomes an expectation, it can devolve into a transactional view of relationships, and that diminishes all of us. If we approach life by saying, “I’m not going to do anything for anybody unless I am thanked for it,” we are doomed. And this is especially so for those in the one-up position. No one should we expect to be thanked when they stop oppressing someone. “Thank you for not abusing me anymore? Thank you, our country’s leaders, that you made it illegal to enslave others, and if you keep it illegal to deny equal rights based on race, gender or orientation?” Abuse, slavery, oppression, exploitation, violence – they all must end, and stay ended, but the oppressors shouldn’t expect thanks; they just need to do the right thing. And even in less severe situations, basic human decency should never be withheld because someone failed to use the magic words. And to further complicate things, it is also problematic, to call the words magic. Teaching children they are magic can have the opposite effect of them helping to cultivate loving relationships when seen through a transactional lens. “Why can’t I have ice cream for breakfast,” and “why didn’t you get me a pony?” I said “please and thank you!”

Faith and love aren’t about the exchange of goods. Thanksgiving isn’t tit for tat, scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours. It is a life posture. It is living altruistically, and it can be manifest in ways small. – you know, random acts of kindness and senseless beauty, and in ways enormous. Consider rescuers during the Holocaust. They were a diverse lot; the one thing they held in common was they did it not do it for a reward, not for fame and glory, not so others would think highly of them, and gush thankfully about how wonderful they were. No! They did it because it was the right thing to do. Someone needed help, and they could help. So they did. Period. Altruism at its most noble. Sadly, not what how our country, by and large, responded as revealed in the recent Ken Burns documentary.

Thanksgiving isn’t a response to discrete acts. It is an “attitude of gratitude” for life itself, not an expectation that we will be thanked.

But what do we do, then with the end of the second part of this morning's text where Jesus appears upset that only one thanked him? Doesn't this contradict what I am saying, and what the previous story about servants said about not expecting thanks? Actually, no, it isn't a contradiction even though I thought it was until I realized two things. Firstly, the one person with a skin disease who thanked Jesus is the *only person in any of the gospels who ever thanked Jesus for anything*, meaning that the other nine's lack of thanking Jesus is nothing new. Secondly, in reading the text more carefully, I discovered that Jesus isn't miffed about not being thanked. Yes, the one thanked Jesus – he needed to in order to live gratefully. But, Jesus didn't need to hear it. Jesus *didn't* say, "why didn't the others thank me?" No! He said, why is this one the only one who praised God? Not, "why didn't they give me a transactional "thank you," nor, "why aren't they more grateful that people won't discriminate against them because they are now ritually clean," but, rather, Jesus wants to know why the nine aren't embracing an attitude of gratitude, a life posture of thanks for all that God provides? This is what Jesus invites all of us into – a life of justice and joy. Living thusly means, doing the right thing; making the world a better place, dismantling systems of oppression, not treating anyone like a worthless servant, nor milling around waiting to be thanked for what we should be doing just because it is the right way to live. Life is about justice. But it is also joy. Revel in the beauty of life itself. Stand in awe at the gift of life. This is what it means to say, "Gunalchéesh." It is, "thank you, Creator, for another day; Thank you for the bounty of the earth. Thank you for the opportunity to serve."

What a gift life is. May we use it well, for when it comes down to it, faithful living isn't about my needing to be thanked. It is about my need to express and embody thanksgiving. And, it is about creating habitations fit for all people and all creatures great and small. May all of us freely serve in thankful response to the wonder of being alive, secure in our identity as children of God. That my friends, is what thanksgiving is all about. May we live into fullness of thanksgiving today, and in all our days. Amen.