

“The Power of Thanks”

October 8, 2017
Luke 17:11-19

Rev. Dr. Alan Bennett
Wall Street United Church

How many of you remember George Burns? He lived to be 100 years old. He was one of America’s best-loved comedians. [*Remember the O God Movies?*]



George once told this story from his childhood. When he was seven years old, George and three other Jewish boys from his neighbourhood, (George Burns was Jewish) formed a quartet. They called themselves the Peewee Quartet. “Now there was a big department store,” George explained, “that threw an annual picnic. The highlight was an amateur talent contest. Contestants came from all the different churches in New York. Now, right around the corner from where we lived there was a little Presbyterian church. How it got into our neighbourhood, which was almost totally Jewish, I’ll never know. Certainly it didn’t do a big business. They had no one to enter the contest, so the minister asked us four kids to represent the church. We jumped at the chance. So that Sunday, there we were, the Peewee Quartet — four Jewish boys representing a Presbyterian church. We opened with two good Jewish songs — “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling,” and “Mother Machree.” We won first prize. The church was given a purple velvet altar cloth, and each of us kids got an Ingersoll watch, worth about eighty-five cents.

I was so excited I ran all the way home to tell my mother. When I got there she was on the roof hanging out the wash. I rushed up to her and said, ‘Momma, I don’t want to be a Jew anymore!’ If this shocked her, she certainly didn’t show it. She just looked at me calmly and said, “Do you mind me asking why?” I said, “Well, I’ve been a Jew for seven years and never got anything. I was a Presbyterian for one day and I got a watch.” And I held out my wrist and showed it to her. She glanced at it and said, “First help me hang up the wash, and then you can be a Presbyterian.” But, while I was hanging up the wash some water ran down my arm and got inside my new watch. It stopped running, so I became a Jew again.”

George Burn’s story reminds me of the six-year-old whose turn it was to say grace for the Thanksgiving dinner. The family bowed their heads, and he began his prayer. He thanked God for his friends, and for Mommy,

Daddy, Grandma, and Grandpa. This time without prompting he even remembered his sister. He then thanked God for the turkey, the dressing, the mashed potatoes, the pumpkin pie. Then he fell silent. Everyone waited. He looked up at his mother and said in a whisper, “If I thank God for the broccoli, will he know I’m lying?”

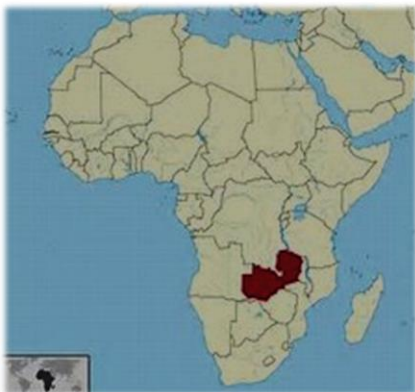
Today is Thanksgiving Sunday in Canada. In a world that seems to have gone crazy with fear and hate and senseless violence, we live here, for the most part, in peace and security. Canada is a country where untold numbers of people in other parts of the world would love (give anything!) to come to. In our world today, due to a combination of war and climate change, upwards of a million people are on the edge of starvation. By way of contrast, our concern is overeating and childhood obesity. Truly, as Canadians we have much to be thankful for.

In Luke 17, we read of ten who had leprosy, who stood at a distance from Jesus and shouted, “Jesus, master, have mercy upon us!” They shouted because lepers were not allowed to get close to people. Jesus looked at them and said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” It was a directive that must have sent a wave of hope over them. This was the act required of one claiming to be cured.

Medicine and religion were not separate in ancient times, the way they are today. Priests often acted as doctors and inspectors of health. If a person was found to be free of the illness, he or she would be given a certificate of health from the priest and be allowed to return to normal life.

To understand the impact of such a gift, we need to know a little about this disease. Today leprosy is treatable by penicillin, and has largely disappeared from the western world. But it is still a problem in India, and parts of Africa.

When we were missionaries in Zambia, I spent a couple months at the Chikankata Hospital, an outpost deep in the bush. (I was a patient with hepatitis). While there I walked around & saw a lot of leprosy.



At the time, Chikankata was the largest leprosy treatment centre in Zambia. It was then and still is a Salvation Army mission hospital. I learned that people who contract leprosy can have the disease for years before any symptoms appear. When they do appear, the first symptoms are nodules on the skin that grow larger and larger. Eventually they lead to deep wrinkles all over the body. Then the lips, nose and ear lobes grow thicker, until the face begins to resemble that of an animal. Ulcerations appear everywhere, causing arms and legs to become horribly mutilated. Finally, as the disease progresses, fingers and toes literally begin to drop off. Before they die, the victims go blind. It is not a nice illness.

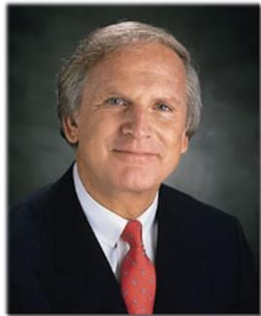
Furthermore, leprosy is contagious, which is why in ancient times anyone who had it was ostracized and shunned. Everyone was terrified of it. Today we would call it being quarantined — same thing.

Knowing this, it is difficult to understand why all ten did not come running back to thank Jesus. You would think that anyone cured of such a fate would do anything to find the one who had freed them, and thank that person face to face. But it just didn't happen. Was the one who returned more grateful by nature or upbringing? Are some people always more thankful than others? How important is it to say thank you to people and to God for the things we receive in this life? We know that it is good manners to say thank you, but does it go deeper than that? Why do we like being thanked for the things we do, and feel hurt when we are not?

I have a memory of a time when, along with three other clergy, I walked out the front door of the Hotel Dieu Hospital in St. Catharines, Ontario. The Ministerial Association had just met there for lunch. The meeting was over, and we were heading out. As we got to the front door the man ahead of us held the door open for us and we followed him out. Perhaps it was because we were all deep in conversation, or maybe it was because we were part of a group, but regardless, none of us said 'thank you' to the man. The reason why I have not forgotten is because he started shouting at us at the top of his voice! He was furious that none of us members of the cloth had had the courtesy to say thank you. As for us, we were in total shock. We were not used to being publicly yelled at. But you know something? Ever since that day, I have never failed to say 'thank you' to anyone who holds open a door for me.

Denis Waitley, is in his eighties today. He is long retired. He was a highly sought-after American motivational speaker and writer. Denis told a story that I have never forgotten. It goes back to the summer of 1993. In that year the Mississippi river, the Missouri river, and others in the American Midwest all flooded. It was the worst flooding in a hundred years.

Volunteers worked themselves to exhaustion filling sandbags around the clock. In Greene County Illinois, a group of convicts volunteered to help. Everyone was needed and they were sent to fill sandbags and help shore up a levee protecting a little community by the name of Niota Illinois on the banks of the Mississippi.



According to Waitley, of all the volunteers, the prisoners worked the hardest. They went without sleep. They would often refuse to leave the worksite even to eat. Yet in spite of all the efforts of all the volunteers, the waters rose, the levee gave way, and the town with its two hundred houses was lost. When that happened, he says it was the prisoners who were the most upset. These so-called hardened convicts just wept openly.

“So why?” asked Denis Waitley. “What was going on?” “Why had these men from a prison suddenly become good Samaritans?” There were a number of reasons. The first is, for once, they had a positive purpose in life – for most, it was the very first time. It was an opportunity to do something good – a way to help. And secondly, for the very first time in their lives, they heard people thank them over and over again. For those men, just being thanked was a life-changing experience. And that is the power of gratitude. It brings us closer to others in a way that nothing else does. Whatever our status in life, no matter how much we have or do not have, when we experience compassion and gratitude, we become far more truly human, and it brings us much closer to God and his love.

Let me close with this story. I read it in The British Clergy Journal quite a few years ago. Dr. C. Thomas Hilton wrote about a woman, a cleaner, in the hospital where he was a practicing physician. This woman had become friends with a little boy in the hospital who had a terminal cancer. As she cleaned his room, they would talk of many things. The day came when the boy’s mother sought her out, and told her that her son was very low and would likely not survive the day. He was asking to see her. Would she please come and talk to him?

What would you say if you were in that situation? She had absolutely no training. She was not a counsellor. Here is what she did. She sat down beside his bed, held his hand, and said to him, “I want you to know that God made you, God loves you, God sent Jesus to save you, and God wants you to come home and be with him.” After a moment of silence, the little boy said quietly, “Tell me again.” She repeated her words. God made you, God loves you, God sent Jesus to save you, and God wants you to

come home and be with him.” With total sincerity the little boy leaned forward and said, “Tell God, ‘Thank you.’”

So why should you be thankful on this Thanksgiving Sunday in the year 2017? God made you, God loves you, God sent Jesus to live and to die for you, and God wants you to be his child now and forever.

Amen.