

IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS

11 On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. 12 As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, 13 they called out, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!' 14 When he saw them, he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were made clean. 15 Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. 16 He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. 17 Then Jesus asked, 'Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?' 18 Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' 19 Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'

(Luke 17:11-19, NRSV)

The sweet sound of Christmas music can be heard in the mall. Christmas decorations have been on display in some stores since Halloween and the giant Christmas tree sits majestically in front of Rockefeller Center. All the sights and sounds of Christmas can only mean one thing—it must be *Thanksgiving!*

Harvard preacher and professor, Peter Gomes, lives in Massachusetts, and reflects, "I always spend Thanksgiving at home in Plymouth. Down there we claim a certain responsibility for this national festival, and if there were no Pilgrim fathers and mothers to tug at the national heartstrings, the cranberry and the turkey people, not to mention the greeting-card people and the football coaches,

would be in throes of economic and psychic depression. We all know the story so well, perhaps even too well: English immigrants, later to be called Pilgrims, sail rather by accident into Cape Cod harbor and claim the territory that they call New Plymouth. They work hard, fight plague, disease, and disaffection, and produce ‘The Mayflower Compact’ and many children in the meanwhile. After a harvest in 1621, more bounteous than their meager skills at husbandry deserved, they had a harvest festival to which they invited the [Native Americans]. Grateful to God for keeping them out of the hands of the [Native Americans and] their English creditors...they ate and drank themselves silly for three days” (*Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, pp. 231-232).

Had the *Mayflower* voyage been more peaceful, had the health of more Pilgrims held out, had they literally found a land flowing with milk and honey, would we be celebrating Thanksgiving today? Naturally they would’ve been grateful that all had gone well, but would they have called for a three-day celebration just to say thank you to God? I have my doubts. From what we know of human nature and by reading today’s scripture lesson, it seems that sometimes it takes hardship to make us appreciate what we have.

The story from the New Testament Book of Luke starts with ten lepers who were contagious and therefore outcasts, socially and legally. According to the law, lepers had to stay a minimum of twelve feet away from everybody else. Whenever someone came within earshot of them, the lepers had to shout the humiliating words, “Unclean, unclean.” Lepers lived separated from their fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, and friends.

In today’s story, the news of Jesus healing a leper was in the air. Three days earlier Jesus made quite a splash by healing a man with leprosy. And now three days later, Jesus walked by a small leper colony outside of Jerusalem

when he heard desperate voices crying out, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us, have mercy on us. Dear Jesus, *please* help us.” And he did. Jesus saw them and said, “Go show yourselves to the priests.” The priests would perform a purification rite and allow them to return to society. The text says, “As they went, they were healed.”

I find it interesting that they were not healed until they went. We’ve surely made spiritual progress when we can hear the voice of God, when in our hearts we have an inkling of what God wants us do. But it requires real faith to take that first step while still being in the midst of our difficulties. It is in our willingness to believe and act on our beliefs that God can do the improbable, sometimes even the seemingly impossible.

Having experienced the seemingly impossible, all ten former lepers ran as fast as their legs could carry them to find the priest and ultimately return to their families. Suddenly one and only one of the ten froze in his tracks then turned and ran back to Jesus to say thank you. The text points out that the thankful man was a Samaritan of all people.

Why the Samaritan? The Samaritan knew what it meant to be an outcast long before he contracted leprosy. Rev. John Thomas, president of the UCC, observes that, since the man was a Samaritan, “...he was twice scorned, twice rejected, twice removed from the community. As a leper, he was...isolated, an object, no doubt, of revulsion and fear on the part of his neighbors. And as a Samaritan he would have been seen as an outsider-and a despised one at that-to the more orthodox Jews of Galilee. Perhaps this Samaritan leper suffered more and thus his healing evoked a more profound gratitude”

<http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=359>.

Maybe this was true of the Pilgrims as well. They had endured so many hardships and heartbreaks. In England these early Congregationalists survived persecution and many died on their stormy Atlantic voyage. It was during that first grueling winter that half of them died, and at one time only seven were healthy enough to take care of the rest.

If the Pilgrims had literally experienced smooth sailing from England to America and if they had been satisfied with abundant food from the beginning, would we be celebrating this holiday called Thanksgiving? When we're living on easy street and coasting along pleasantly through life we tend to get complacent and take life's blessings for granted. We're often too busy to pray and focus on our faith. But when the storms of life beat us down, suddenly we start praying like there's no tomorrow.

The Samaritan lived his whole life as an outcast. Perhaps this had sensitized him to the plight of other disenfranchised people and deepened his spiritual life and his dependency on God. So when he contracted leprosy, he naturally turned to God with this crisis as well. The other nine though were not Samaritans. They had no idea what it was like to live as an invisible person, as a despised nobody. I imagine when their leprosy hit they too started fervently praying. Yet when the healing came, the other nine, whose spiritual roots were more shallow, forgot all about the Great Physician who made the miracle possible. They were so focused on getting on with their lives, on picking up where they had left off, that they suddenly had no time to utter another prayer, even one of thanksgiving. But the lifelong outcast, the leper, remembered the one who made him whole and ran back to offer his heartfelt gratitude.

And so it is with us, when our loved ones or livelihood is threatened, we find time to beg for God's help. But when life's road is smooth and easy, we sometimes put

our faith on cruise control. It's human nature and doesn't make us bad people. However, if we can keep the communication lines open with God in the good times, we'll find the difficult times easier to bear.

Our prayers can become pretty dull if we just quickly hit the high points, the big things, followed by a hasty "Amen." Instead, if we focus on the seemingly little things, the mundane that would no longer be mundane if it disappeared tomorrow, we might find that our prayers can become an ongoing dialogue throughout the day. One day try offering God thanks for the little things, not all at once, but as they come your way. Upon waking, "God, thank you for a warm bed." When making the coffee, "God thank you for clean water." When eating, "God thank you for the milk in my cereal." When stepping outside, "God thank you for the warm sunshine" or "God thank you for the rain that waters the earth." Upon greeting someone, friend or stranger, "God, thank you for this child of yours." And so on. Once you get going, an ordinary day becomes a procession of blessings, literally a thanksgiving parade.

Every day we have a choice to make, will we be like the forgetful nine who neglected to thank Jesus or will we be like the grateful Samaritan who literally fell on his knees and thanked God? My hope this Thursday is that somewhere between our hefty helping of turkey and second piece of pumpkin pie, we might be filled with the joyous spirit of Thanksgiving—giving thanks. AMEN.

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only
Thanksgiving Sunday
November 20, 2005
The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, giver of all good, who continually pours your benefits upon us, we praise you for the order and constancy of nature; for the beauty and bounty of the earth; for day and night, summer and winter, seedtime and harvest; and for the varied splendor of each season. We give you thanks for the comfort and joy of life, for our neighborhoods and our homes, for our families and our friends, and especially for our country where we can be free to live as we see fit.

We offer our humble hearts to you O God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
AMEN.

(Portions of this prayer were adapted from *Book of Worship: United Church of Christ*, p. 534)