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Eve of National Thanksgiving

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Vienna, VA

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“Where Does Thankfulness Come From?”

Text: Luke 17:11-19; Philippians 4:6-20

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

A *typical* Thanksgiving sermon goes something like this: We should be thankful. We are not thankful - or, not enough anyway. So be thankful! Amen.

That doesn't work very well, though. We know what we should do. We know how we should be. But *why* are we like that? Why do many fail at thanksgiving every other day but Thanksgiving? Why has the art of the thank you note vanished? Why do we so often forget to give thanks, for one another, for what we have been given?

Perhaps the answer lies in what makes Thanksgiving Day so successful one day a year. What happens on this day that makes it special and unique and sets it apart from all other days?

Well, it is, they say, the busiest travel time of the year. People go home. We go to be with family. We leave our isolation and our inward focus for a day or two to be with others and focus on them. We share ourselves and give of ourselves. On this day, time isn't the enemy or something to beat, but something to share. We make an effort for others - to cook for them, to be there with them, to tell them that we appreciate them. And it's right. It feels right. Like the way things should be. *Because it is.*

So, it seems that thankfulness is something we cannot do well by ourselves in isolation. Thankfulness is best done with others, is best shared with others, and *when* we share with others - sharing ourselves and what we have.

Which is why, I think, in our increasingly individualistic and isolated world, where friends are virtual, names are a list in our contacts, phones are answered by machines or voice mail, and conversation is by text . . . where we are together less and less, no wonder thankfulness is such a rare commodity these days.

But it's not only that we have squeezed each other out of our lives - how often does God, too, get squeezed out? Our knowledge of the world and how things work in nature and medicine and science means that God is not looked to so much anymore for what we need. The rain doesn't come from God but from that low pressure system making its way

across the country. The harvest comes from genetically engineered seeds, precision GPS guided plowing and reaping, and well-timed irrigation. My healing comes from a pill or an operation or stem cells re-creating in our bodies what time and disease have taken away. And in such a picture, God is so very far away - from my thoughts, from my life, from my reality. He is not in my mind, and so am I even in His? And so giving thanks? Well, it's just not in the picture.

But then something goes wrong. Rains become floods, the harvest comes in short, the medicine doesn't work, and sickness becomes death. And then we wonder why is God so far away? But that's where we've put Him, isn't it?

But then what happens? Communities come together to help those effected by natural disaster. We give to the needy. Families come together to mourn. **And thanksgiving blossoms again**, *in the midst* of struggle and hurt. Because in the midst of these we are forced out of our individual and isolated lives and put together again. And we focus on others. We share ourselves and give of ourselves. We make an effort for others. And it's right. It feels right. Like the way things should be. *Because it is.*

It's why people who have lost everything are often so thankful. In the midst of something gone horribly wrong, there is something right. And we see the hand of God at work for us. The hand that wasn't not there before - it most certainly was. We were just blinded to it. By our sin. By our stuff. By our success. By our bounty. So how fortunate when what is blinding us is then taken away, and we see again. And give thanks.

Perhaps that is what happens on Thanksgiving. Or at least, part of it. We see again. We see each other again. As not just as a name on a list or a friend with a like, but as gifts from God.

And so it was on the road that day that marked the border between Samaria and Galilee. A traveler came and broke the isolation of ten lepers. God in the flesh, come to be with His people. Not a God far away, but a God near. To share Himself and give of Himself. To give healing and life. And a Samaritan, an outsider among the Jews and an outcast because of his leprosy, got not only the gift of healing, but a family of faith. Someone who came to be with Him. *And so there is thanks.*

And it is this same God in the flesh, God with us, who then traveled the road to Jerusalem, to give more. To ascend the cross to give Himself and His life for us. For the forgiveness of our sins. That we be His family of faith. To be not a God far away (which, in fact, He never is), but a God near. God with us.

And so it is this night, as this same God of life comes to be with us. God in flesh and blood, come to be with us. Our God now preached into our ears and placed into our mouths. To share of Himself and give of Himself. To give us the healing of forgiveness

and life eternal. And we sinners receive not only these gifts, but a family of faith. *And so there is thanks.* Thanks be to God!

Thankfulness that we then share with others. Not because it is a rule or something we have to do, but because that's what thankfulness does. It is not an isolated thing, but a shared thing. It is joy that is shared. It is giving what we have received. It is living in the image of God. And we know, this is right. The way things should be.

It is what the Philippians did with Paul. Paul didn't ask for their help, but they couldn't do otherwise. And though far apart in distance, they were close in heart and faith. And so there is giving, sharing, thanksgiving.

And so it is good that we have a day set aside for this, to help us see again. To help us learn again thankfulness and how it is. A day not to be the *only* day of thanksgiving, but the first of many. The model that can help us make everyday a day of thanksgiving and a life of thanksgiving. A day to see again the God who is near, the God who has given us all, and who won't stop. So that we, too, can give of ourselves and share ourselves and so regain the thankfulness and joy we seem to so often lose. Or at least misplaced. Until we see our place in Jesus again. Until we see His place on the cross again, where all is made right again. The way things should be. Right with God in Jesus, so we can be right with each other in love.

And we bless the Lord for His steadfast love.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.