

Thanksgiving, St. David's, Deut 8:7-18, Luke 17:11-19 11/23/2017 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Thanksgiving should be an easy holiday and an easy sermon and an easy service. We're just hanging out being grateful, right? Many of us on social media have been posting a gratitude daily since November started. I bet in many of your homes, there will be a time tomorrow to go around the table and name something you're grateful for; then, everyone goes to sleep in a tryptophan haze and gets up at 2 AM to stand in line at Target. Oh wait, no need to do that—Walmart and Target open at 6 PM tomorrow. You can do your Black Friday shopping on Thanksgiving now!

Somehow, given all this, Thanksgiving is not such an easy holiday. We get competing messages. We say we are grateful for what we have, and then we gorge on rich food and launch into a cultural season celebrating excess. Fortunately, at St. David's, we can at least gather together for an hour a week during the upcoming season of Advent to hear a counter cultural message about waiting, and endings, and beginnings.

But it's not Advent yet. That's ten days away. It's Thanksgiving Eve.

Back in August, when it was sweltering and buggy and when the grass grew about an inch a day, the store shelves started choking with Halloween swag. Pier One had little ghost lights and CVS had candy corn and every single store everywhere had Pumpkin Spice Everything. Fall couldn't come soon enough. Then a few days before Halloween, those ghost lights went on sale and Pier One was flooded with Christmas tree ornaments and CVS changed the colors of their candy and added handwarmers and tins of hot chocolate and Wegmans discounted their pumpkin potholders and featured red and white striped ones instead. Christmas was two months away, so it was clearly time for peppermint and snowflake everything.

So, what happened to Thanksgiving? You could probably find a few turkey cocktail napkins on sale on your way home tonight; but overall, Thanksgiving feels like footnote. Why is that?

Here in church, of course, both Halloween and Christmas are related to big feasts. Halloween is the Eve of the Feast of All Saints, and on Christmas, we celebrate the birth of our Lord. It's the shortest church season, lasting only 12 days, but shopping malls and markets everywhere want us to savor the season, celebrating it for two months in advance, then on the second day of Christmas they want us to move on to Valentine's Day.

Thanksgiving is not an Anglican feast day. It's a United States national holiday. Have you ever been out of the country on Thanksgiving? When I was 20 years old, I spent a college semester in London. Thanksgiving isn't a holiday there. A creative writing major friend was staying with a family instead of an apartment or dorm like the rest of us, and that family tried to make a few of us a proper Thanksgiving feast. I remember the turkey took about three hours longer to cook than we thought it would. I think we went around the table and said something we were thankful for. I know I was exhausted by the time I got back to my apartment.

What I don't remember is writing this family a thank-you note. I hope I did. My parents raised me to do that. But I am virtually certain that I neglected to thank them for trying to help some American students observe Thanksgiving. I don't even remember the family's name, and I don't recall ever seeing that friend again once we got back to Arizona. I thought, maybe I can find him on Facebook and send the family a belated note 29 years later and somehow work that into this sermon.

Nope. Couldn't find him.

So I feel convicted by Jesus saying in tonight's Gospel, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"

Maybe Thanksgiving isn't easy because gratitude isn't easy.

Lepers in Jesus' time were ostracized. They were separated from their families and the community. So these ten lepers in the Gospel weren't only diseased, but isolated.

Can you imagine being forced away from your family, loved ones? Can you imagine having a disease, and me saying to you, "sorry, you can't come to St. David's anymore, unless you stop having leprosy"?

There was a process for lepers who had been healed. They had to show themselves to a priest, and only then could they be restored to their families.

So the other nine were just following the process, showing themselves to the priest *as Jesus had told them to do*, and then could be restored to their families. They must have been bursting with joy, after such a separation. But the tenth stopped before this process could be finished, and turned back to lie down at Jesus' feet and thank him.

That kind of faithfulness and gratitude is hard to imagine. Putting Jesus in front of your family, your community, the people you love most; and yet, that is what we are called to do: to live with Christ at the center of our lives.

The Greek word "Eucharist" means Thanksgiving. When you come up to this table to receive, are you thankful? Or does it ever feel, a little bit, like you're doing God a favor? After all, *you* showed up to church. *You're* doing the right thing.

Gratitude is hard. It's also the best spiritual practice I know to help get through difficult times. I've probably told you all this many times before, but when I was working as a hospital chaplain intern fourteen years ago, I had to deal with death much more regularly than I do as a parish priest. I chose hospice and oncology for my rotations, so most shifts had a death, and the chaplain on call went to all the deaths. The loved ones of those who died didn't always share my

faith nor even necessarily want a chaplain. Sometimes their expressions of grief included literally throwing themselves on the floor or hyperventilating.

It was stressful. I felt like every call meant stepping into another person's nightmare.

Before I went to the hospital, every single shift, I would take an Anglican rosary, handle each bead, and name a gratitude. That practice got me through a rough nine months.

As Christians, we are called to be the tenth leper, the one who turns back to thank Jesus. We are called to thank God for everything, even things we believe we earned ourselves. In Deuteronomy, Moses reminds the people that when they have built houses and all is going well, 'Do not say to yourself, my power and the might of my own hand have gotten me to this wealth.'" Give thanks to God in all things.

We are going to pray together the General Thanksgiving tonight, and the hardest and most important part in that glorious prayer may be the line "We thank you for those disappointments and failures that lead us to acknowledge our dependence on you alone."

That line grates a bit. "Thank you for this disappointment" doesn't come naturally. But remembering those disappointments and failures alongside all the beauty and successes helps us gain perspective. We are loved. We are part of something larger than ourselves. And we are not the center. Christ is the center.