

SCORN OF FORLORN REBORN

November 23, 2014

Christ the King Sunday

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Psalms 95:1-7a

Psalms 100 (semi-continuous)

Ephesians 1:15-23

Matthew 25:31-46

Thanksgiving Readings

Deuteronomy 8:7-18

Psalms 65

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Luke 17:11-19

Color: White



Let's just say at the outset this morning that I looked at that new hymn, *Ten Lepers Facing Constant Scorn* and thought to myself, "They were the forlorn of their day. What could possibly help them to be reborn, to be made new except to be cured of the disease that ravaged their bodies." And so I jotted down the thought, "Scorn of Forlorn Reborn" and behind our thinking together today are thoughts about this story in the gospels about Jesus and his encounter with the lepers.

Several years ago an official of the U.S. post office, seated with the postmaster general was interviewed during the Advent season on a television news program. He had turned the hum-drum job of handling the dead-letter box into an exciting and rewarding job. Letters to Santa Claus usually didn't get to the North Pole, but he would see to it that they would and so he gathered a cadre of willing workers to respond to the thousands of letters. He became known as Santa Claus in the post office trade. He reported

that his dead letter office saw to it that over 700,000 letters were answered from the jolly, bearded fellow.

Then, this same man was interviewed in February. Most of us probably never thought that it would have been worth a follow up interview, but someone at NBC did. He reported that although Santa had answered over 700,000 letters and fulfilled the verbal requests of millions more, his office had received only one thank you note to Santa.

There is something within the human spirit that resists the simple act of saying "thank you." If you are like me, you find that written notes are time consuming, that you don't know how to say what you want to say, or that you do not intentionally forget to say thank you, it is just that you are so absorbed in what you are doing, that in the process of delaying in order to find better words, you eventually are absorbed in the next urgent item that comes your way and you

never complete your intention to say thanks to another.

Consider for a moment this vignette in the life of our Lord. He was walking with his disciples along the border between Samaria and Galilee. They were entering a village when they came upon a band of lepers - ten in all - both Jews and Samaritans. It is amazing isn't it, how mutual misery can cut across class, social, religious, and racial lines. When we hurt like these lepers, we cannot afford the silly prejudices that afflict the rest of humanity.

Somehow, when these lepers saw Jesus they knew he could help them. "Jesus, Master," the lepers cried out, "Have mercy upon us." How could Jesus deny their request? That was why he had come. His Kingdom was not one of power and might but of loving service. We sometimes forget that, even in the church.

Jesus' whole reason for being was to reach out to others. When Jesus saw these lepers he said to them, "Go show yourselves to the priests." The O.T. required the cured leper to have his cure validated by the temple priest. Jesus required an act of faith out of these lepers. They were to start for the temple even before they were healed. Luke tells us that, as they were journeying to show themselves to the priest they were cured. Can you not imagine them jumping and shouting when they saw their friends with decaying and disfigured bodies suddenly being made whole. They must have been delirious with joy.

One of them went back to Jesus to say, "Thank you." He was a Samaritan, one whom the Jews despised. That was important to Luke, the Gentile writer. "Were not ten cleansed?" asked Jesus. "Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give thanks but this foreigner?" To the grateful Samaritan he said, "Rise and go your way, your faith has made you well."

I've thought to myself, the faith of the others made them well, too didn't it. But an examination of the Greek text suggests that Jesus said, "Your faith has made you whole, unified, totally well, in proper relationship to others." Jesus knew that these lepers were not completely healed until they had learned to say, "Thank you." No matter how stunning our physical appearance, no matter how impressive our intellectual credentials, no matter how complete our material success, we are still a moral and spiritual cripples if we have not learned to say, "Thank you."

"If the lepers had only come back. If Jesus had not walked through Samaria they never would have been cured. If is a pretty big word for its size.

"If" is the biggest little word in Scripture. From the opening sentences of Genesis to the closing verses of the New Testament that little word "if" plays an important - even decisive - role in divine- human affairs. If Adam and Eve obeyed God they could live in Eden; if they sinned they would be expelled. And the closing word in The Book of Revelation is: If anyone adds to or takes away from the words of Scripture, there will be consequences. Between these "if" bookended are over 1,500 sentences that begin with that conditional conjunction.

If I find in Sodom fifty righteous...
If my people.....humble themselves...then I
will forgive their

Sin and heal their land
If I forget thee, O Jerusalem...
If the salt has lost its saltiness...
If thy right eye offend thee...
If any man will come after me...
If any man has ears to hear, let him hear.
If a man shall die shall he live again?
If we walk in the light...
If we love one another
If your enemy is hungry

You are my friends if you do what I command you.

There are hundreds more, but these examples show how salvation hinges on that tiny word, "If."

Then there are the "if onlys". If only I were young again. If only I had more money. If only I were smarter. If only I had gone to college. If only I knew then what I know now. If only I had taken out insurance. If only....the words that complete this phrase are seldom happy ones, but they make the point that some of the pivotal decisions of life center on that diminutive word "if." If is the word that confronts us. We, in our arrogance, try to confront God with it: "If you get me out of this problem, I'll dedicate my life to you." "If you heal my mother, I will worship you." "If you make my business prosper, I will tithe."

It doesn't work that way. We don't make the deals, we can only accept or reject them. God says: "If we endure, we shall reign with Christ....If we have died with him, we shall also live with him..."

Bishop Tutu said that he first considered becoming a priest the day in his childhood when a white minister doffed his hat to Tutu's mother. What if that minister had not done that?

"If we endure..." Emanuel Kant wrote his most important philosophical treatises when he was 74. Goethe finished his greatest drama, *Faust* when he was 80. Tennyson penned the best-loved of his short poems, *Crossing the Bar*, when he was 83. Verdi composed his superb oratorio, *Stabat Mater*, when he was 85. Michelangelo did his finest artistic work when he was 87, and here in the U.S. Justice Holmes was still writing brilliant legal opinions when he was 90. The Venetian artist, Titian finished his great painting, *The Battle of Lepanto*, when he was 98.

"If we disown him, he will also disown us."

That is a sobering if statement isn't it. We would also expect the last of these collected four in II Timothy, to read, "If we are faithless, he will be faithless." But, God is true and the text affirms "if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself." Faithfulness is God's nature and character. There are going to be times, when, despite our faith, we lapse into our old self, depart from the faith we know. This verse assures us that when this is indeed a lapse and not a departure into a permanent apostasy, God continues to search us out and to bring us back to his forgiven and restored fold.

If this is how God is, why do we have such a difficult time in expressing our gratitude to God? Why should faithful worship, faithful service, faithful giving, faithful loving, seem so demanding and be so difficult for us?

SAYING THANK YOU IS A STATEMENT, FIRST OF ALL, OR OUR CHARACTER.

Is there anything that makes us think less of a person than to bestow upon them a gift and never receive a simple "thank you?" I know, ideally, we ought to give and not expect anything in return. And yes, I know new brides and grooms, it takes a lot of time and energy to acknowledge all those gifts. But saying "thank you" is one of those things in life that separates the sheep and the goats. Everyone may feel gratitude but, to go to the trouble of expressing that gratitude is a sign of character.

SAYING THANK YOU IS ALSO A STATEMENT OF OUR FAITH.

St. Paul advised us to give thanks in all circumstances. The ability to develop a spirit of gratitude regardless of our situation is a statement that we believe that God is at work in our universe and that all things work together for

good for those who love him. Such an attitude makes for a joy and peace that is beyond price.

Several summers ago I read *Lake Wobegon Days* by Garrison Keillor. It is a delightful portrayal of small town eccentricities. One of the memorable characters is Brother Louie. Brother Louie was a member of the Brethren Church (The Brethren, like the Lutherans, drove Fords in Lake Wobegon, but distinguished themselves by carrying steel Scripture plates bolted to the tops of their license plates. The verses were written in tiny beads so they showed up well at night.)

Actually Brother Louie exceeded all the others in his vehicular piety. "His car (a Fairlane four-door) was a rolling display of scripture truth, equipped not only with verses on the license plates but also across the dashboard, both sun visors, the back of the front seat, all four armrests, the rubber floor mats, the ashtray and glove compartment, and just in case you weren't paying attention, he had a painted verse across the bottom of the passenger side of the windshield - "The earth is full of the goodness of the Lord" for your edification as you gazed at the scenery.

Brother Louis kept a plastic bucket by his left leg, where he had put Gospel tracts, rolled up and wrapped in bright cellophane, which he tossed out at mailboxes as he drove along. The cellophane was to protect the Word from rain and also to attract the eye. And finally, one year, he found a company in Indiana that advertised custom - made musical horns. Louie's horn played the first eight notes of the Doxology. It sounded like a trumpet. He blew it at pedestrians, oncoming traffic, while passing, and sometimes just for his own pleasure. On occasion, vexed by a fellow driver, he gave in to wrath and leaned on the horn, only to hear "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." It calmed him down right away. The horn cost Louie more than a hundred dollars, and when he

traded in the Fairlane on a Galaxie, he took the horn along."

Isn't that wonderful? Hearing a doxology calmed him right down. A sense of gratitude will do that to you. Saying "Thank you" is a statement of character, it is a statement of faith and more importantly,

SAYING THANK YOU IS A STATEMENT OF GRACE.

Perhaps the greatest barrier to saying "thank you" is our pride. We don't like to acknowledge our dependence on anybody - even God. We fancy ourselves to be self-made men and women. We like to think that we have no one to thank but ourselves.

This is a detriment to joy in the church today. How can we thank God for our deliverance from sin and death when we are convinced that we are already pretty good people who deserve everything God has given us? We don't see our illness, so how can we thank our Physician?

Saying "thank you" is a statement of character, a statement of faith, a statement of grace, and

SAYING THANK YOU IS A STATEMENT OF WORSHIP.

That is primary reason for our gathering here today. That is what our hymns are about and our offering and our architecture. It is a way of saying "Thank you." That is why worship is not optional for the Christian.

God continues to encounter us, meeting us wherever we are in our lives. When we see and feel God, we are eager to ask God for mercy and grace. We know the power of prayer, and we often receive answers to our prayers. Our response is typically a quick "thank you" before continuing with our regular routines. The leper who returns to offer thanks is not only healed,

but also made whole. Like the leper who returns, we need to respond in faith to God's involvement in our lives and offer thanks. It is then that we are made healthy and whole.

SECRET #1

In order to be a thankful person, do not focus on the things you don't have. Focus on the things you do have.

In the Peanuts comic strip, Lucy and Linus are having a profound theological discussion. Lucy says, "Linus, I'm as low as I have ever been. Life is a drag. It is boring, it is so dull, and it is blah.

Linus, Lucy's brother, tries to cheer her up and says, "You know, Lucy, at times like this you really should count your blessings. You should think of all the things you have for which to be grateful."

"Ha" says Lucy. "That's a good one! What do I have to be thankful for? I could count my blessings on one finger. What possibly do I have to be thankful for?"

Linus rather shyly says, "Well, for one thing, Lucy, you have a little brother who loves you." Lucy is hit by this and touched by it, and she starts to cry. And in the last scene of the coming strip, Linus says to the camera, "Every now and then I say the right thing."

Do you focus on what you don't have or do you focus on what you do have?

Nadine Hammonds is from Memphis, Tennessee. At the age of 67 she received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Bible Society primarily because she had memorized the whole New Testament. She didn't just memorize 1 Corinthians 13; she memorized Romans 5 and Revelations 21 and all the hard stuff. At the awards ceremony someone

asked her, "Nadine we were surprised to learn that you are blind. Are you resentful that you could never see?"

"Oh, my goodness, no," she said. "I do wish I could see a sunset. I would love to see the ocean. I'd love to see the stars! But see, I learned a long time ago, you don't focus on what you don't have. I'd love to have those things, but I don't focus on them. I think of what I do have - - a sharp mind and a good memory!

Nadine's brother is a portrait painter, and when he painted his sister, he has painted her with beautiful eyes . . . wide open. "Because," her brother says, "My sister sees more than most people ever see in a lifetime."

That is the first secret . . . don't focus on what you don't have, focus on what you do have.

SECRET #2

Do not focus on your present circumstances. Focus on the presence of Almighty God.

Circumstantial focus is replaced by a clear perception that God is present in the very midst of these circumstances.

In the early 17th century Martin Rinkart began his pastorate in Eilenburg, Germany. The 30 Years War had erupted in Europe. This was followed by the plague in 1636 and thousands lay dying. For a brief while Rinkart averaged 40 - 50 funerals per day.

In order to stay focused, Martin Rinkart called on the presence of God. To his congregation he said, "We must lean on God's presence. We must be the presence of Jesus for one another. We must have the sustaining presence of the spirit to guide us or we will not survive."

Martin was so focused on the presence of God that he wrote a hymn. It is a profoundly

meaningful hymn of thanksgiving and one that is frequently sung in Germany. When you sing it today, think about a pastor burying people he loved day by day and think of a man who didn't dwell on those circumstances but instead we lean back on the arms of God.

Clarence was a relatively poor man. He had a large family - six children - and money was usually scarce for them. When the children were small and needed shoes but needed a washing machine far worse. The old machine had simply coughed its last breath.

Clarence saw an ad in the paper for a second-hand machine and went to look at it. The address led him to a well-to-do neighborhood with manicured lawns and street lamps. The further into the neighborhood he went the more envious he became until the envy gave way to downright frustration and anger. And by the time he rang the doorbell he was at a boil on the inside. Why did some people have so much and others so very little?

Charlotte answered the door. "You can have it for five dollars," she said, and invited him inside. Clarence began to simmer down and the low price cheered him considerably - so much, in fact, that he found himself confessing to them what a hard time his family was having, and how three of the children had worn out shoes. Too much rope skipping and braking on the tricycle they shared had done a number on them.

Straining to scrutinize past the entrance hall Clarence tried to affirm them, "You must be very happy." Charlotte turned suddenly and left the room.

Clarence was stunned and apologized to George, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend your wife."

"O, you didn't offend her. You see, we have only one child - our daughter, and she's never been able to walk."

Clarence concluded arrangements for the washing machine and went home. He entered his bed room and closed the door and got down on his knees and asked God to forgive him for fretting about life's inconvenience. He found the three pairs of shoes that were worn from skipping and making brakes. He held them and thanked God that they were so worn.

We focus too much on the circumstances in our life and fail to see the presence of Jesus. It is a secret, if you would have a thankful heart, don't focus on present circumstances, and focus on the presence of God. It makes all the difference.

SECRET #3

If you would be a person with a thankful heart, focus on how you can serve other people, not on how they can serve you.

One of the words in the Greek language for servant is spelled, t-h-e-r-a-p-o-n. From the word "servant" in Greek ("therapon") we get the English word, "therapy."

The best therapy is helping someone rather than thinking, "Why didn't someone thank me? Why didn't I get a thank-you-note? Why didn't I get a word of encouragement or appreciation?" Instead, helping others with their needs will help you with yours!

Paul Beyer was working on his farm in Lancaster a long time ago when he was stopped by Pop Swychert. Pop said to him, "Paul, for nine years I've been taking food from Lancaster County to a little mission in New York. I'm getting too old to make the trip. You're 31 and strong. Could you make the trip for me this year?"

Well, Paul made the trip now for 39 years, delivering food donated from the farms of Lancaster County, PA to a mission in New York

City. He has packed the truck, driven, it and unloaded it.

A reporter from the *New York Times*, once said to Paul Beyer, “Paul, this is a miracle! For 38 years you’ve driven all this food to New York.”

Paul replied, “That’s not the miracle. The miracle is for 38 years I’ve driven all this food to New York City and never once gotten a traffic ticket.”

“Why do you do this,” asked the reporter.
“You’ve got another job, you’ve got a family; you’ve got responsibilities. Why do you do it?”

Paul gave a one word reply:

“Gratitude.”

If you focus on the why’s and the why not’s of your present circumstances, you are in serious danger of missing out on life. You can become so full of resentment and bitterness that you may miss the things God’s given you.

Focus on what you do have, not on what you don’t have. Focus on the presence of Jesus, not on present circumstances, no matter how bad they may be. Focus on how you can serve other people, not on how they can serve you. Then, perhaps you will claim that your favorite word . . . like Mark Twain’s or Paul Beyer’s is “Thanks!”