

“On Giving Thanks” — Consecration Sunday

Pastor Mark Nelson

“On Giving Thanks”—Luke 17:11-19—Consecration Sunday—11/20/22

Today is the second of two Stewardship Sundays. Last week, we asked you to commit your time and talents to ministry here at Peace. And *today*, at the end of the service, I’m going to ask you to commit your money to our congregation and its ministry for this coming year.

And I know that talking about money may be interesting for some of you. And for others of you, talking about money makes you nervous. Or. Some of you may just be thinking, “*I don’t care if this is about money or not. Just make it quick and let’s get to the pie!*”

To those possible reactions, I say three things: The sermon is not just about money; 2.) If you’ll stick with me, I believe the Gospel and the reading will make a difference for you; and, 3.) Believe me when I say: “*Oh, I know, I know, that I stand between you and pie.*”

Now, these days I’m around grandparents quite a bit. And one of the topics that comes up surprisingly often is, “*How do I get my grandchildren to say, ‘thank you?’*” I remember one grandparent who felt bad because her grandchildren never said “*thank you*” for any of the gifts she had sent them. And she was hurt that they just weren’t very grateful.

On a whim, I asked her: “*If you’re grandchildren never sent you a thank-you note, would you stop sending them gifts? Would you demand that they return your presents?*” She laughed and said, “*I’d be tempted!*” Then she said, “*Of course not! I’d still send them gifts. And I certainly wouldn’t take them back!*” “*So,*” I said, “*You don’t send gifts to get notes? Why do you send gifts?*” “*Because I love them,*” she said. “*Thank you notes are nice, but gifts aren’t dependent on them.*”

And that is today’s Gospel from Luke. In this story, Jesus heals ten lepers. They are healed, all of them. But only one went back to Jesus and said, “*thank you.*” He’s an outsider. A Samaritan. Maybe someone who is not used to being the receiver of a gift like healing. And for some reason, this one leper didn’t take the gift for granted and chose to return to Jesus to express his gratitude. In response, Jesus praises him—*thanks him*—and sends him on his way. This is a great story for what it says about Jesus and the Samaritan leper.

And it’s also a fascinating one, in this way. The story doesn’t say anything about the nine lepers who didn’t return to say thank you. There’s no indication in the story that their lack of gratitude affected the gift. Jesus *didn’t* take the gift back! He *didn’t* threaten or warn the nine! He *didn’t* send the disease to reinfect the ungrateful! He *didn’t* direct the temple authorities to arrest them and return them to the leper colony. *No*. Saying thank you (or not) had *nothing* to do with the gift!

This story is about the *generosity* of God. The gift of healing is free. We call that *grace*. A gift with no strings attached.

It’s the same for us. Every *day* we are surrounded by gifts and the gifts never stop, are never taken *back*. They’re not in any way dependent on the receiver. The gifts just *are*.

But, sometimes; sometimes a gift is so big, so unexpected, that we *do* notice. And that’s when we—like the one leper—realize that life itself is a gift from God, totally given to us without cost, every day of it and every part of it.

* Because sermons are meant to be preached, I prepare them with spoken presentation in mind. So this written sermon does drift away from proper grammar and punctuation.

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2

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And this happened to me earlier this year here at church after another Covid variant had gone through. The congregation finally seemed to be moving on a bit. And after two years more people were coming back to worship. After two years of standing apart from one another and learning how to be heard through an N95 mask and dressing like someone under house arrest. And becoming proficient on Zoom and going to church on-line. (Which makes about as much sense is going to a restaurant online. Where you can see and hear everything but you can't eat or smell or touch any of it). So to finally be back together. Was so wonderful!

I heard it from you, too. How good it was to come to church again. I heard it from those who used to say the church is the people, not a building. But you had really missed the building! One of you who used to complain once in a while about noisy children, but now you said, you had really missed the noise and the kids! So many of you were saying about the church, “*What a gift!*” And I was, too! What a gift this congregation, *the church—this church—is!* One of the most meaningful gifts in our lives, not only for what it means for us but what it does for others.

That’s what Paul was writing to the Corinthians about. Jerusalem was in trouble. And Paul was trying to collect an offering from the churches he had started to help the struggling church in Jerusalem. Apparently, this was a hard sell in Corinth. The church in Macedonia had already given generously, even though they were poorer than the church in Corinth. Paul was asking the Corinthians to give to something bigger than just themselves. That was harder for them. That’s hard for us, too.

Now, you and I know there are a lot of things we can do with our money. But it boils down to five things; five things you can do with your money. Number one: you can spend it, and we're all pretty good at that. Two, you can pay debt depending on how much you've already spent or regret spending. Three, you can pay your taxes and I sure hope you're doing that. Or you can save money, and then fifth, you can give money away. Those are basically the five things you can do with your money. And for the majority of people, that's the order in which they're done.

But here, I want to go through that list one more time, but this time I want to put a little bit different spin on it. Number one thing we can do with our money. Well, that's for me. The number two thing we can do with our money; that's for me too. The number three thing we can do with our money; that's kind of just America and me. Number four that we do with our money; save it. Well, that's for me. And then, number five, well, that's for God and others.

So it goes like this: Me, me, me, me, God and others. And this way of thinking about money is totally understandable. Because this is the script most of us inherited. This is what we saw modeled at home and this is certainly what in culture encourages.

But when Jesus showed up, he literally flipped that script. He said. You’ve heard this before. “*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*” Where your treasure is. Your treasure is your stuff. It’s your money. It’s your hopes. It’s your dreams. And Jesus says, “*Wherever your treasure is, your heart follows.*” And he wasn't trying to shame us. What He said is not a carrot or stick; *no*. Jesus was actually just giving us a fact of life: whatever gets our money gets our attention.

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If you've ever had a new car you understand this. For the first few weeks, maybe the first few months, you parked it at the edge of the parking lot. As far away from all the other cars as you could get. In fact, if you had a mini-van you might not even allowed your kids to eat in it. You were spit-cleaning every smudge. That car cost a lot of money. So it got a lot of your attention. It had a piece of your heart.

Jesus knew how this works. And Jesus knew that our money takes a little bit of our heart everywhere it goes. So he says, *"If you want to know where your heart really is,"* Jesus says, *"Show me your money. Or show me where you sent it. And show me where you spent it."* Because your heart follows your money.

Jesus is actually inviting us *into* something. Inviting us to bend our lives toward something. He's inviting us into a world, or use his term, a *"kingdom."* Heaven on earth. A way of living and being that is *bigger* than us.

That what St. Paul is referring to when he talks about *"cheerful giving."* Paul is encouraging us to give joyfully. Why? Because it's an opportunity for the Gospel to be strengthened and says, *"Yes! This is who I am and what I stand for. Giving to it is what I get to do and nothing could make me happier."*

And so today, the invitation is given once again to every *one* of you. We have all been given gifts by God, every day. We have been given life and meaning in this congregation. And today we stop to say, *"thank you."* And to express that gratitude by continuing to support the ministry of Peace Church with your money.

"The point is this," Paul says. *"The one who sows sparingly will reap sparingly. The one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully."* You sow a pledge of money to the Gospel in this place; through worship, education, fellowship, through our service outside these walls and our gifts that go around the world. You and I reap joy as you to be part of something bigger than ourselves. And God's kingdom. Heaven and earth. Become a bit closer because of your commitment.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

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