

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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October 13, 2019 – Thanksgiving Sunday

The Gospel According to Your Belly Button

*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving
let your requests be made known to God. – Philippians 4:4-9*

This weekend is a good time to remind ourselves of the gospel of the belly button. Can you all just check? Do you all have a belly button? Does anyone not have a belly button? Your belly button is the physical reminder that you did not make yourself. You were made in your mother's womb, and your belly button is the reminder that for nine months, give or take a little, you were fed through an umbilical cord that attached where your belly button is now. And then when you were born, even though the umbilical cord was cut and you became separate from your birth mother, someone had to look after you, feeding you and changing you and making sure that you were safe, for quite a long time, until you were able to look after yourself. And even after you are able to look after yourself, you still depend on others for so much: very few, if any of us, grow all of our own food; our water comes from wells and springs and streams and taps; we depend on a healthy community and a healthy economy and a healthy environment for so much of what we need; we depend on community water and sewer systems and grocery stores for our physical needs, on electrical networks and natural gas pipelines for heat and light, we depend on friends and family for our emotional and spiritual health. And after you grow old and are unable to look after yourself again, others will look after you again, caring for you, right to the end. That is the way life works. We are cared for, we have others whom we care for, and then we are cared for again. That is the gospel of the belly button, the good news that we are not alone, that we are surrounded by care, from beginning to end, our lives are sustained by love.

Thanksgiving is the time of year we make a point of expressing our gratitude for that love and care. Thanksgiving is in the fall, when farmers and gardeners are harvesting their crops, and so it is celebrated with displays of produce and the fruits of the earth. We start by saying grace, by being thankful for the food that is being harvested and has been harvested. But more than that, we are thankful for

these bodies, flawed though they may be, they are still a miracle. We are thankful for all the things that sustain our bodies – clean air and water, nourishing food and refreshing drink. We are thankful for all those who provide them for us: farmers and truckers, the people who work in the warehouse, the grocery stores and the water and sewage plants, the people who put food on our tables. We are thankful for animals and plants, both wild and cultivated, on which we depend for food and much else, for the natural systems which provide us with air and water and pollinators and warmth. We are thankful for our friends, families and communities, all those who care about us, and whose lives bless ours. We are thankful for all that nourishes our souls and spirits – for love and laughter, for music and the beauty in many different forms that nourishes our spirits. Our lives are sustained and blessed in so many ways that it is impossible to list them all. And just as a stream has a source, so in saying thank you we look upstream from the things and the creatures and the people for whom we are thankful to the source of it all, to God, however we understand God, and we say, “much obliged. Thank you.”

“Much obliged” is an old way of saying thank you, but there is an important truth implied in it, something that is missing from our modern way of saying thank you. When we say much obliged, we are acknowledging that whatever the other person did for us, it obliges us, creates an obligation, creates a debt which must be repaid. The obligation is to pay it forward, to respond to generosity with generosity. So Thanksgiving must be joined to Thanks-Living, a generous response to the generosity we have received.

The medieval monk Meister Eckhart once said that "if the only prayer you say in your whole life is 'Thank you,' that would be enough." Thanksgiving is the first and the last of our prayers, the one that most expresses our sense of being creatures, being contingent, being dependent, being cared for and cared about.

On this weekend (in Canada), we remind ourselves to say thank you, and I hope that you just do not say thank you to God, but you also remember to say thank you to all of those people who are important to you, your parents, or grandparents, your brothers or sisters, your children, if you have children, your teachers and the people that you work with. This is a weekend for expressing appreciation, for overflowing with thanksgiving. You cannot say enough thanksgivings this

weekend. But of course, if this is the only weekend on which you say thanks, then everybody around you is going to think that your appreciation is a little forced and fake. So you might need to make a point of saying it a little more often, just so they know that you really are thankful and not just doing it because you think you should. Surprise people by saying thank you when they least expect it: say thanks to the policeman who catches you speeding and the people in the city hall who take your taxes. Find ways to express your thanksgiving to the people who work in the grocery store and the bank and the drug store, to the fireman who trains to rescue you in case of emergency, and the people who work in the sewage plant.

I once spent some time visiting a man who had terminal cancer. He was past thinking of being cured. He just wanted to live as long and as comfortably as possible. His wife and an adult daughter were visiting him when I arrived in his hospital room, and at one point in the conversation his daughter, who is developmentally delayed, was saying she was looking forward to a grand Thanksgiving Dinner. And this man, who was quite sick, reminded her that the point of Thanksgiving is not just to have a big meal, but to remind ourselves of all that we have to be grateful for. So I asked him what he is grateful for. And he made quite a list all the blessings in his life: the love of a good woman, a daughter who rubs cream on his feet, two little granddaughters who are grateful for his place in their lives, a medical system that is prolonging his life and keeping him comfortable without bankrupting him, a comfortable bed, a wheelchair that fits, clothes on his back, food on his table, a furnace to keep him warm, a faith that helps him face the future without fear,... When I left him that day he was still thinking of things to add to the list. And it is worth remembering that even in the most challenging struggles of life, there is quite a list of things to be grateful for. Maybe this weekend, rather than having one person offer a grace, go around the table and ask each person what they are grateful for. Make sure you tell them that they can't repeat something someone else has already said. There really is no shortage of things to be grateful for. You won't think of everything you should be thankful for this weekend. You're going to miss a few things. That's why I think it is important to cultivate an attitude of thanksgiving every day, so that we are continually noticing (and rejoicing over) the many ways in which blessings come to us, even in the most difficult times of our lives.

In the stress, pain and panic of our broken, aching world we must sometimes step back and remind ourselves of all the wonderful gifts for which we can give thanks. Many people find it helpful to keep a gratitude journal. There, sometimes online so others can be inspired, they make a point to stepping back to acknowledge the small things, bring to the surface what some take for granted, celebrate when they have made it through something difficult. Whether related to the ordinary or the extraordinary aspects of life, theirs is a daily practice of stepping back to give thanks.

“The first creation story shared by Christians and Jews is punctuated with these “step back” moments. In the midst of extraordinary action the Creator practices reflection: “it is good,” “it is very good.” In response to the loving Creator, we say “yes,” and “we are so grateful” for the beauty, diversity, resilience, and sustenance that is blessed creation.

There is a story about Jesus running across a community of people suffering from leprosy. There are ten of them, and he heals them all and sends them away. One of them, a Samaritan, comes back and says a simple thank you. That one, the Samaritan, is not only healed, but he is made well, made whole. The first gift Jesus gives is the physical healing. All ten receive this gift. The gift that God gives to you and to me may be something quite different. It may not be physical healing at all. What matters is not the gift, but whether we give thanks for it. For until we give thanks for it, we do not receive the second gift of wholeness. You probably know people who are never satisfied, who never are grateful because nothing is ever enough. They are desperately unhappy people because they never stop to appreciate the gifts they have received. For it is with thanksgiving that the more important gift comes, the gift of celebration, the happiness of being grateful, of being content, of knowing that we are blessed. I hope that this weekend, you not only receive the blessings for which you could be grateful, but you also receive the gift that completes every other gift, the gift of thanksgiving. Amen!