

Sermon for October 9, 2022

Luke 17:11-19

Thanks – the Gift that Keeps on Giving.

The seaside town of Cobh (a Gaelic name, pronounced ‘Cove’), situated near Cork on the south-west coast of the Republic of Ireland, has the dubious distinction of being the Titanic’s last port of call before her ill-fated trip across the Atlantic in 1912. But more than that, for more than a century prior to the Titanic, Cobh was the point of embarkation to the New World for waves of thousands of Irish people who risked a long unpredictable sea voyage – not to mention unknown living conditions at the end of it - in order to escape famine, economic woes, persecution, sectarian violence, or whatever the disenfranchising flavor of the day in Ireland happened to be. There’s a heritage centre in Cobh that I visited a few years ago; it houses an exposition of the history of emigration and resettlement undertaken by the Irish across the years; and immortalized in a statue outside the centre is a young woman by the name of Annie Moore, who as a teenager embarked on a ship with her two younger brothers and made the journey to New York – and I have to say, viewing the statue it was hard not to immediately identify with the devastating human side of such decisions. If you came over as a settler to this country, or the US, or the West Indies, or went even further away to Australia in the 19th or early 20th century, you left home knowing that you were parting from family and friends for life – but you accepted that reality, as well as the uncertain prospects that awaited you on the other end, as part of the deal. In this day and age of convenient air travel and instant communication, it’s hard to imagine that, isn’t it? To those people, goodbye really meant goodbye. And yet, unless we are first generation Canadians ourselves, or unless there are some among us whose origins are with the First Nations, mostly all of us have something in common: that somewhere in own personal histories are people who responded to unimaginable economic, social, and political forces with more than a little faith and courage and strength; who made the decision (or were forced in many cases) to leave all that was familiar and start over on this continent, and whose energy and vitality helped weave the multi-faceted fabric of the society we encounter today. That visit to Cobh was, for me, a vastly humbling experience, and I left there wishing rather fervently that there was a way I could express my thanks to my Irish forebears for taking those heart-wrenching risks. It reawakened the notion of thanksgiving for me not simply as a seasonal event, as a day or a weekend set especially apart for that purpose as we’re doing today, but more as a routine part of life, a habit; perhaps as an antidote for the culture of complaint with which we often feel surrounded, and which casts shadows on our ability to clearly see the many blessings in which we live and move and have our being.

In an interesting bit of synchronicity, the benefits of thankfulness surface in the gospel lesson appointed for today. The ten lepers are told to act as if their healing has already been accomplished - to *“go and present yourselves to the priests”* – which they need to do in order to rejoin their community. That’s pretty bold, isn’t it, to send someone off in the belief that they’ll be healed? But what I hear in that directive is the concept that as faith is acted upon, faith develops.... and we see this most perfectly exemplified in the one who returns to Jesus to praise God for the gift of his healing. In the process he shows us in utter simplicity the true essence of faith, which is the ability to see beyond ourselves to God as the author of our wholeness, and to respond to God with gratitude. The ten, we recall, all receive the gift of healing for their condition, but the one who returns to express thanks is gifted with an additional layer of blessing in the simple act of doing so. Articulating thankfulness is a powerful thing; it blesses us and those around us; it’s a gift that keeps on giving.

Winston Churchill is credited with a story about a little boy who fell off a pier into deep ocean water. An old sailor, ignoring the danger to himself, dove into the waves and after considerable struggle brought the boy to safety. Two days later, the boy’s mother came to the pier looking for the sailor who had rescued her son. Finding him, she asked “are you the one who dove into the ocean to bring my boy out?” “I did”, he replied. “Then where” the mother demanded, “is his hat?” This delightful anecdote underscores the kind of attitude that we unfortunately see all too often these days – where criticism upstages gratitude. But equally, if all we take out of the story of the 10 lepers is an obligation to write thank-you notes, then we’re not doing it justice. It’s more about the need to rise above our own self-absorption to see what is going on around us with eyes of faith, and to see God’s hand in all aspects of our lives....certainly today, as we give thanks for harvest and all the blessings of the abundance we enjoy....but in all the seasons and circumstances of life. Meister Eckhart, the 13th century theologian and mystic summarized it this way: ***if the only prayer you ever say in your life is ‘thank you’, it will be enough.*** I often think he had this passage from Luke in mind when he coined that bit of wisdom.

So today as we reflect on this gospel story, may we live with a daily awareness of **all** our blessings; may we cultivate an attitude of thankfulness and express it often; and may our faith grow in proportion to our willingness to exercise it. For this we pray and together say **Amen.**

The Ven. Nancy Adams – Harvest Thanksgiving 2023