

**Sermon "The Spirit of Thanksgiving"**

**October 12, 2025**

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**St. Luke's Church, Wilton**

Emily Post advises, "It's never wrong to send a thank you note". Ah, Emily but it isn't wrong to do a lot of things, when is it expected? Grace Bonney sums up the modern etiquette on thank-you cards like this:

*"Just say thank you. The person receiving the thanks will just be happy to hear it, the mode and message are rarely as important as the simple act of acknowledging someone's kindness."*

A Dear Abby column said that the main reason people don't send thank-you notes isn't lack of time or motivation. It's not knowing what to say.

Alyce Mackenzie writes of a friend who, whenever a bride (notice how men get off the hook here) did not have the good manners to write a thank-you note for a wedding gift, would write her the following

*Dear Amanda:*

*Thank you for inviting us to your lovely wedding. I am writing to make sure that you received our gift. If you didn't, can you let me know and I'll arrange for a duplicate to be sent to you?*

*Wishing you every happiness in your marriage,*

*Jean and John Smith*

It sounds so passive aggressive, doesn't it? Or at least very Ann Landers. It puts the bride in a tough spot. Assuming she got the gift and has just not yet gotten around to writing thank-you notes or doesn't intend to do so, how is she supposed to respond?

*Dear Jean:*

*I did receive your gift but have made the decision not to write thank you notes since I'm very busy and they are very time consuming. You may, if you wish, send me a duplicate gift.*

*All good wishes to you in your marriage,*

*Amanda*

At this point, it seems there are no winners, only losers in this situation. The art of the thank you is supposed to release gratitude and not fuel resentment. So now that we've begun to explore the fine art of the thank you note, let's move to today's gospel.

Jesus cleanses ten lepers. One comes back to say thank you (maybe the same percentage of people who today write thank you notes?). Jesus says, “but were not ten made whole?” - meaning where are the other nine?

Let’s explore what might have been going on with them:

First, I don’t think they couldn’t have felt some degree of gratitude. This was a life-transforming event. Lepers at that time were exiled from family and the rest of society. This healing allowed them to leave the community of lepers they were exiled to and return to the life they had before. But even change that’s good presents its own set of issues. And perhaps their minds moved on to a whole new set of worries very quickly which just swamped those feelings of gratitude.

*That priest has never liked me, will he really certify me as healed? How much do I have to pay for this? I don’t have any money.*

Or if the nine get past the priest there are all the worries of returning to normal life like, *Will my family take me back. Will they trust that they won’t get leprosy? What if my wife has taken up with another man? What if my children won’t even recognize me? What if I can’t get my old job back?*

It’s like a person living with a form of incurable brain cancer. After much treatment and prayer, it has gone into what is called “partial remission” – it is not growing, but it cannot be removed. One day it will grow again and take her life. But not today. So what’s the attitude? Gratitude for the gift of a cancer-free day? Or worry about when the day is that it will come back?

Melody Beattie writes that,

*“Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend.*

So who wouldn’t want the fullness of life, acceptance, order, clarity, a feast, a friend? How do we learn to do better at this gratitude stuff with 37 days until the Thanksgiving Holiday? Maybe we still have memories from the forced “thank yous” our parents made us say or write as kids. When they said “Now say thank you for that piece of candy”, the tone implying, “Say thank you or I’m going to lock up all your Legos, Barbies, whatever for a month”. Nadia Colburn shares that when gratitude was elicited, she wanted to rebel.

*Like forgiveness, gratitude is something that can be cultivated, but it's not something that should be asked for and certainly not demanded. But as I've gotten older, I understand more and more that difficulty and gratitude are not either/or. As I've seen in my own life, the more I can make space for suffering, the more I can make space for other emotions, including gratitude, as well. We heal and we feel gratitude. We live in a complex, often unjust country, and we honor where we live and nourish the many positive seeds.*

This is where we take our cure from the Indigenous Peoples whom we remember today. In 2013 Botany professor and enrolled member in the Citizen Potawatami Nation, Robin Wall Kimmerer, wrote a book called, "Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants". "Braiding Sweetgrass" explores reciprocal relationships between humans and the land, with a focus on the role of plants and botany in both Native American and Western European traditions.

In her book she received permission to print the The Haudenosaunee thanksgiving address which is a central prayer in Haudenosaunee tradition recited daily in the beginning of school days as well as social, cultural, and political events. The address gives thanks to the parts of nature necessary to ecosystem sustainability and emphasizes the ideology that all animals and plants within an ecosystem are connected and each plays a vital role in it.

The phrasing of the address is composed of 17 main sections and ends with a closing prayer. The 17 main sections are: The people, The Earth Mother, The waters, The fish, plants, food plants, medicine herbs, animals, trees, birds, four winds, The Thunderers, The Sun, Grandmother Moon, The stars, The Enlightened Teachers, and The Creator. Within each section, gratitude is given for the gifts that section provides to humanity.

Can you imagine starting every day with a deep thanks for the earth and waters and plants and animals? Here gratitude conjures up no image of a vassal leaning in thanks before his lord who grants blessings or apologies, as in the medieval world view that still frames so much of our contemporary western world. Instead, this gratitude situates us in the great web of all life, with all beings, and helps us remember the true miracle that it is to be alive and our deep relationship with all things.

A 2<sup>nd</sup> grade Sunday school teacher recounts a lesson she did with her children on this story of the ten lepers. "How do you think Jesus felt when only one person came back to thank him?" she asked. One boy raised his hand. "I think he would have felt happy that one person came back and thanked him." That's the attitude. Perhaps we could feel happy, even thankful, too?