

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
The Church of the Good Shepherd
Thanksgiving Eve – Wednesday, November 25, 2020
Luke 17:11-19

As the psalmist wrote, "Those who dwell at the ends of the earth will tremble at your marvelous signs; you make the dawn and the dusk to sing for joy." In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

You are blessed. There is, however, a perversity to knowing that you are blessed. For, the only way to know and experience that one is blessed is to know and experience in some way suffering or lack. It's like the age-old saying, that light would have no meaning without darkness. Blessings, like challenges, are experienced relatively. There is only one absolute and that is God – everything else is relative. We know presence because we have experienced absence. We celebrate the warmth of joy because we have felt the cold sting of sorrow. We rejoice in the brightening sky of dawn because we have endured the seemingly endless darkness of night.

Oftentimes, the closer the experiences are to each other, the more intense the appreciation. I suspect that is what makes sunrises so meaningful and why we are so drawn to the bittersweet drama of lightening in a thunderstorm storm. Perhaps that explains the exuberance of the Samaritan leper who, upon realizing he had been healed by Jesus, ran back to express his joy and thanks, all the way shouting his blessing and praising God. Perhaps it was the shocking juxtaposition of being an outsider alienated by and afflicted with leprosy in one moment to finding himself an insider now accepted, healed, and purified in the next moment that was so overwhelming that the only reasonable response was to run madly in gratitude to the source of joy and relief.

This is Thanksgiving Eve and this year will be a Thanksgiving unlike any other we have experienced in our lives. The Coronavirus pandemic will force many of us to celebrate the holiday either alone or with only our immediate household. Thanksgiving has become a holiday seemingly inseparable from the notion of being with friends and family – gathering in large groups and eating together, telling stories and singing together, watching football on TV together. Nearly all of our cherished customs and traditions around Thanksgiving consist precisely of the actions that we cannot – and should not – do this year. Many will have to be alone for Thanksgiving. Many others, if we do gather with those outside our immediate household, will have to refrain from touching or hugging and wear face masks. Many others still will not even be able to enjoy a solitary holiday at home because they are sick in the hospital or working overtime to care for those ill from the virus. However, for those of us fortunate enough not to be sick, let us remember that even this much disappointment and deprivation is a blessing.

So often, we get resentful when we don't get exactly what we want. We let our disappointment cloud our vision of what it is that we do have and prevent us from appreciating even that. A preacher friend of mine reminded me about the movie from the late 90's called "As Good As It Gets." In it, the main character, Melvin Udall, is a miserable, selfish, egotistical person. Everyone around him is for the most part normal, but with their own stories of hurt and heartache. But Melvin wants things to be better than they are. At one point he asks his therapist, "What if this is as good as it gets?"

My preacher friend says that in a sense this movie is struggling with the notion that we need to stop searching for perfection and embrace reality as it is. Even in the less than ideal or the imperfect, we can find blessing – and even this blessing, as meager as it may seem at times, is worthy of thanksgiving. Perhaps this is what the Apostle Paul means when he teaches to give thanks in all things. That is all things – the seemingly good as well as the what seems so obviously

bad. God wishes to work through all things for good – if only we allow the Spirit to do so. This doesn't deny the bad, the painful or evil, but it does add proper perspective and remind us that it is relative – like everything else in creation.

Even when things don't happen the way we want or aren't what we are expecting, there is real blessing and gratitude to be found. Melvin Udall could never be happy because he could never accept reality as different from his idea of perfection, and in this way he is blinded to the good. So, while this may be as good as it gets this year, it is still wonderful and we are still blessed. Indeed, this year of disappointments, fear, uncertainty, and real threat has helped me to realize just how blessed we are. Nine months into a global pandemic that has interrupted our lives in every possible way, sickened over 60 million people world-wide and killed over 1.5 million, collapsed economies, broken families, isolated and imperiled the mental health of so very many.... yet here we are. Good Shepherd has grown stronger – our bonds of love and fidelity have been nourished and fortified in all sorts of surprising ways. We have needed each other in these past months, and we have responded to that need with love. Others have needed us and we have responded to their need with generosity and compassion – faithfully giving ourselves away in love to our neighbors. We have needed God, and God has faithfully walked alongside us and picked us up when we stumbled. Oh, how blessed we are.

Last week, I was speaking with my Spiritual Director – with whom I have been in relationship for over ten years. When I was telling her about what I wanted to say to you this sermon, she responded: "You are blessed when you know you need God." Ahhh...yes. This is just another way of translating the well-known but often misunderstood Beatitude, "blessed are the poor in spirit." You are blessed when you know you need God.

We have been and will continue to live through this extended season in which we are certainly the poor in spirit – after nine months of the pandemic, we most assuredly have realized that we need God! And with that realization, our eyes have been opened in new ways to the wondrous movements of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in the lives of others. Our hearts have been softened with compassion and warmed with love for our neighbor, and we are better able to discern the face of Jesus in each other and in those around us. Our ears have been newly attuned to the cries of the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, and those who suffer in mind and spirit, and we more keenly pick up on the pitch of their sorrows and join them in their heartache. Our mouths have been loosened and more readily shape the loving words of compassion and mercy, and we are now more willing to share lovingkindness and gentleness with our voices and be peacemakers in our interactions. Oh, blessed are those who know they need God!

Eugene Peterson has yet another way of saying, this particular Beatitude. In his contemporized translation of the Bible called *The Message*, Peterson puts it this way: "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule." We have all experienced varying degrees of being at the end of our own rope – especially this year. God's wonderful promise is not only that God is always with us, but that with less of us in the way we are blessed with more of God.

Tonight, we know that we need God and know that we are indeed blessed. And tomorrow, may we run madly towards God and shout our gratitude with joy and thanksgiving!

Amen.