

“Turning Back” / Luke 17:11-19 / 27 October 2013

The best revenge, they say, is living well. But what if revenge isn't your thing; what if the thing you really want to do is the opposite of revenge? Have you ever really wanted to thank someone in a significant way but didn't know how? It can be difficult, especially if the person you're grateful to is beyond the reach of the US Postal Service, fully inaccessible to thank-you cards, beyond the realm of the florist's delivery truck. How do you thank someone who helped you enormously but who chose to remain anonymous? How do you thank someone who's already dead? How do you thank God? Sometimes it's just so hard to know how to say thanks. Our profoundest expressions of gratitude can sometimes seem so insufficient, or awkward, or trite.

When Michelle and I were in seminary, Chloe was born at one pound, one ounce, four months before she was due. Those were terrible days for us. Michelle dropped out of school, and each morning I drove her to Magee Hospital, where she would spend the entire day staring at those monitors that measured oxygen levels and potassium levels, which can be fatal, and blood pressure, and all the other things that I can't quite remember but never quite forget. While Michelle camped out at the hospital each day, I had to keep going to classes because we needed money, and our only chance of that was my getting a full-time job at a church right out of seminary. In the meantime, I held a campus job that paid a mere pittance, and I took a position as the ersatz pastor at two little churches out in Ohio. These were churches that couldn't afford to be too picky about hiring a novice who was visibly very nervous in the pulpit and who only came out on Sundays. They were hard times. But I often say, when God is hardest to understand, God's people shine their brightest. When I think back on those days, it's with an overwhelming sense of gratitude.

The ladies of Eastminster Church fed us for weeks. They brought meals to our apartment in East Liberty. The one I remember best was a lady we didn't know; she brought her casserole and said, “I'm not much of a cook, but, well, here you go,” and she handed us the dish. It was true; she wasn't much of a cook, but it didn't matter. We said, “Thank you. That's so nice of you. Thanks.” But our thanks seemed insufficient—not because we needed the meals so badly, but because it was more than casseroles. It was a concrete gesture of deep concern and support. When those days were over, we asked ourselves, “How can we thank these people, these strangers? We can run a message in their newsletter, but it's not enough.”

About the time of the birth, the students at the seminary organized a 24-hour prayer vigil. Some of them were perfect strangers; some of them were people I didn't even like. But they took half hour time slots and they prayed around the clock, a few of them waking themselves at 2 and 3 in the morning. How do you say thanks for a thing like that? We never found the words, for there are none. In fact, the student who set up the prayer vigil has since taken his church and fled to a more conservative denomination. We've gone our separate ways in life, and from time to time I've been tempted to “unfriend” him on FaceBook, until I remember his act of kindness. Nearly a decade later, I still don't have the words.

One of the two little churches that I pastored was amazingly generous. They were not wealthy people. Their building stands in an impoverished neighborhood of East Liverpool, surrounded by shuttered factories and stray dogs. But they gave us money, far more than they could afford, and cards, and visits. I would stand in their pulpit each week and wonder who was ministering to whom. And I would say “thank you,” but the words seemed so small. They invited me back several years later to take part in their sesquicentennial celebration; all I could do was stand in front of them and blubber tearfully—which is not typically my way. There are no words.

Then, as icing on the cake, the Presbytery of Pittsburgh stepped in and gave us a check for \$5,000. Now, if you ever find that your life is going too smoothly, and you need a little exercise in futility and frustration, try saying thanks to a presbytery. They'll spend twenty minutes arguing whether to even allow you on the docket. There's no bishop, no one individual directly responsible for having helped us. Presbytery is just a huge committee made up of smaller committees. To thank them is to

peel an onion. I even asked the committee responsible for my ordination how to go about saying thanks. They told me, "I don't know. I suppose you could write a note to the presbytery, but then you'd need the Executive Committee's permission to put it in the paperwork for the next meeting." I knew very well that no one even reads their paperwork for a presbytery meeting—no one, that is, except the two fellows from Bower Hill Church, but I hadn't yet had the pleasure of meeting them. And so, we sent our grateful note to the committee in charge of the fund that had helped us. There was no one to thank and no way to thank them even if there had been someone. Whoever it was, they didn't even want our thanks, but we needed to give it.

We made it through those times by the grace of God and the help of God's people, which sometimes amount to the selfsame thing. But I don't know what other parents do who don't have the church connections that became our absolute lifeline during those days. Indeed, we saw other children in that neonatal intensive care unit who did not fare so well, and I believe that in some cases it was due to the fact that the parents weren't able to stay with them round the clock each day. They had to continue going to work, only coming to visit when they could. They didn't have the network of support and care that we had. Our daughter's survival itself was a group effort, and many hands took part in bringing it about. There are no words, but all we had to offer in thanksgiving was those words, "thank you." Have you ever been touched so deeply by the goodness of another person that you wanted to offer some great spectacle of thanksgiving, but it seemed that all you had was a handful of paltry words? Ah, but you do have more than words!

I'm always surprised by this story of how Jesus healed ten men, but only one had the presence of mind, or the gratitude, to turn back and say thanks. Maybe the others were just so excited that they forgot. Or maybe they felt the smallness, the insufficiency of their words of thanks. No one can really know why the nine never bothered to say thanks, though I assume they remained whole all the same. Perhaps Jesus isn't all that interested in being thanked, but one leper felt the driving need to say thanks. That's the thing about genuine gratitude: it compels us; it drives us; it finds a way out of our hearts and into the world. What are you grateful for? How will you say thanks?

Of course, we've all been on the receiving end of the thanks, and we know how awkward that can be. At a performance of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra last season, they wanted to say thanks to a couple who had donated several million dollars. And so, they composed a little operetta just for the occasion, setting a story to music; they had a choir come and sing the story's words, and they performed this brand new musical piece for the donors. I can't recall the name of this couple, but the musical play ended with the choir singing their names and saying, "Thank you." The couple was then called to the stage to take a little bow, grinning sheepishly, more than a little embarrassed by all the attention, in a hurry to get out of the limelight.

Few of us will ever have operettas written in our honor, but it remains true that we don't always know how to accept the gratitude of others. It can be awkward for us because being thanked feels a lot like praise, and that's not usually what we were looking for in the first place. The Haiti Travel Team had the awkwardness of being shown to our bedrooms in Camp Perrin, where we—or some of us—slept on big beds with flowery comforters and more pillows than you could scare up in a whole Haitian village. It was their expression of gratitude. We winced when they slaughtered a young goat on our behalf, a cute little animal that bleated pitifully, and when they chained chickens on hot roofs, exposed to them to the scorching sun for days, just waiting for the night when they, too, would go the way of the goat. And yet, people need to be allowed to express their thanks in ways that make sense to them. And as awkward as it sometimes makes us feel to be a recipient of that gratitude, we must let them. Whether they're writing music for us, or killing helpless barnyard animals, or simply muttering those time-honored words, "thank you, thank you," they're doing what they can to celebrate the goodness that they've received from our hand. We must have the graciousness to accept it. That's why the nine thankless lepers are so surprising. There may not be words adequate to the task of conveying our gratitude, but most of us at least feel the need to try.

Besides all this, we do have more than words. Each of us has a whole human life to use as an expression of gratitude, a life with its possessions, and abilities, and resources. Where we direct our resources will always be a sure expression of the things that we are grateful for. During an audience at the Vatican, a businessman approached the Pope with an offer. If the church would change the line in the Lord's Prayer from "give us this day our daily bread" to "give us this day our daily chicken," then Kentucky Fried Chicken would donate ten million dollars to Catholic Charities. The Pope declined. Two weeks later the man was back, this time with a fifty million dollar offer. Again the Pope declined. A month later the man offered a hundred million, and this time the Pope accepted. At a meeting of the Cardinals, the Pope announced his decision in the good news/bad news format. "The good news is that we have a hundred million for charity. The bad news is that we lost the Wonder Bread account." I have known many people who believe that church is all about the money, that it's a business with sweetheart deals and political leveraging much like all the others. That's why it's so hard for me to talk about money from the pulpit; there are people out there who think that's all we ever do. What if one of them just happens to come to church on that one day of the year when I do? And yet, the life of faith entails the unselfish, faithful use of all the many gifts that God places at our disposal: our time, our abilities, our passions, our relationships, and our money.

You hear the word "stewardship" in churches. Like a lot of the most interesting words (and people) it comes from humble beginnings. A "steward" used to be a "sty-ward," or a keeper of pig sties. Even today, stewardship is a sloppy business. But there is some reason to it. Just as our consumerist age has its guiding philosophy of essentially selfish attainment, so too stewardship has a guiding philosophy. It says that all of life is a gift. To have enough, is enough. Anything more is meant to be shared. Nothing that we hold in our hands can be held forever, and none of it will ever make us happy. Things are entrusted to us, but they are never finally ours. Life is a joyful task in managing the many good things that God entrusts to our keeping for a time: our relationships, our abilities and passions, our personalities, our time, our possessions and resources. All these things are powerful enough to master us, but we use them to great advantage when we hold them lightly, when we recognize that they are not finally ours, when we have the happy freedom to invest them back into the life of the world.

Hiking yesterday down in Greene County (a place that looks like Vermont except with the double affliction of both coal and natural gas) in the fading glory of autumn, I had the poetry of Robert Frost running through my mind. In this life of years, there really are two roads that diverge in a yellow wood: one is the path of self-seeking, and most people follow after it not because they're bad people, but because it's our default setting; it's what our world tells us to do. The other, the one less traveled, is the road of stewardship, which turns back, like that one leper, to offer gestures of thanksgiving.

How should I say thanks for a path through a bright forest on a fall day, sunny and cold—and all the restoration that it brings to my spirit? How do you say thanks? For the child whose eyes meet yours with more trust and adoration than you could ever have placed there? How do you say thanks for that long-dead loved one who saw something special in you, years ago, who reached into your life and made you the person you are today? How do you say thanks for the love of a pet, for friends with whom to share the journey, for that living faith which, though sometimes battered, survives to kindle hope in your heart day after day? The ripple effect of God's love stirs the waters of your life, and that generous love sends its gentle currents through eternity, for even after our years have come to an end, the effect of how we've lived continues in the lives of those we have shaped and the world we've left behind. How do you say thanks? God can be as hard to thank as a presbytery. There is no mailing address, and there are no words. But you have more than words to do the task. You have a whole human life, a whole life with its resources, with its skills, and abilities, its gifts, and its passions. You have your money, and how you spend it will be evidence of whether you are a grateful person, and what for. You say thanks by turning back, and by giving back. Amen.