

Thankful Hearts and Willing Spirits – November 26, 3009
Thanksgiving Community Service – Madison Ministerial Association
Exodus 35: 21-29; Matthew 6: 25-35

“Thanks... Thanks a lot... Thank you... Hey, I gotta go, but thanks... More coffee? No thanks... Thank you... No, thank you... Could you, would you do that for me? **Thanks...**”

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In recent years, it seems as if that simple phrase “thank you” and its casual cousins “thanks” and “thanks a lot” have somehow lost its original meaning and intent. Where to tell someone “thank you” had once had been an expression of gratitude for a gift received or a kindness done, **it has increasingly become not much more than a mark of punctuation**, a convenient way to complete the conversation and wrap up whatever transaction we happen to be transacting so that we may be on our merry way.

“Are we done? Thanks... I gotta go.” “Would you do this for me, thanks.”

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I wonder why this is so...

Perhaps we simply no longer know how to receive a gift or a kindness. Or have we forgotten how truly blessed we are?

Have we somehow lost the capacity – **or at least the willingness** – to let other people in our lives know how much we are grateful and how much they are appreciated for their countless acts of kindness, encouragement and thoughtfulness?

Have we developed such a sense of entitlement - **have we become so accustomed to getting our way?** Is it that all of our wants and needs are instantly met, with a swipe of the debit or credit card, with a click of the mouse on our computer - that we take our good fortune - **our blessings** - for granted?

Or have we simply lost sight of God’s grace-filled presence in our lives? And have we - somehow, somewhere - **forgotten how to respond** to God’s grace with thankful hearts - and bowed head and bended knee - and a willing spirit?

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I have a dear friend named Richard Hanks who spent much of his life working as a manager of a Piggly Wiggly grocery store in North Carolina before he heard and heeded the call of Jesus Christ on his life and became an interim minister in the Baptist tradition.

Now, the role and the task of an interim minister is this: to clean up the mess that the previous pastor left behind. I first met Richard Hanks well over six years ago in the town of Bassett, Virginia when he was faithfully at work doing precisely that. And we soon became co-workers in several ministries in that community. We quickly became brothers in Christ. **We became friends.**

Often, after a long day working together on some project, as we were about to go our separate ways. Richard would say this to me: “I appreciate you.”

Not “I appreciate what you have done or are doing” - not “thanks” or “thanks a lot” - but “**I appreciate you**”...as if to say, “I thank God for you.”

Let’s do this: let’s stand for a moment and turn to the person next to you and simply say to them, “I appreciate you” - and then would that then person say “I appreciate you” back.

Let us stand... (The people stand and greet each other). Now, please be seated.

Now, don’t we all feel better? We now know that we are appreciated... and all of us now have acknowledged how connected we are to each other. Isn’t that a little better than “thanks I gotta go now?”

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The people of Israel who we meet in the 35th chapter of Exodus, beginning with the 21st verse are in bad shape, have been through hell, have done some very bad things - have indeed forgotten who and whose they are - have forgotten that they are God’s people and not some random collection of free agents who can do what they want when they want to.

They have murmured and they have quarreled and have gossiped and have back-bit and mutinied their way across the wilderness. They have been faithless and anxious and they have expended much of their energy and effort grasping for position and power – and in the process creating divisions within that group.

Sounds like a few churches many of us may have known.

And finally, in what is the final straw, the people give up on God and build a golden calf. The people say to Aaron, Moses’ brother “Go make gods for us” and a golden god was made and the people ate and drank and danced around that god and then ate and drank some more and had a party around that golden god. The only thing missing was the football game and the nap afterwards.

They forgot and they forsook and they rejected God. They thought that they didn’t need God, that all that they needed to do was to make their own gods, forgetting entirely God who had brought them safely through the wilderness and who was leading them to a land of promise. **They had forgotten who and whose they were.**

And that was enough for God. While God would not break God’s promise to bring them to that land of promise, God simply would not / could not be present with them, could no longer be in relationship with them any longer. “I will lead you to the land of promise” God tells them,” but I will not go up among you. I will not be present with you, **for my anger would consume you.**”

The people felt and mourned God’s absence; and it was not until Moses spoke to God in behalf of God’s people that God has a change of heart and God renews a relationship with His people.

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And this is where we find these people on Chapter 35, verse 21. A people once lost - **now found**. A people mired in a mess of their own making - **now redeemed**. A people who had forgotten their relationship with God - **had broken their relationship with God** - had learned the hard way what it feels like to journey

through life without the grace and guidance of God - and who were now thankful that their relationship with God was restored... and even renewed.

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And now see – and now hear – how the people responded to God’s presence in their lives.

They came forward...those whose hearts had been stirred... those whose spirits were willing. They came forward in a prayerful attitude of gratitude - **and they gave...**

Verse 21 says that they “brought the Lord’s offering to be used for the tent of meeting and for all its service.” **They gave so that God’s work could be done.**

And look - **and see** - how they gave! They gave everything they had: the money that they had; their precious jewelry; their finest linens.

What often gets overlooked in this long list of donated items in verses 21 through 29 is that the items that the people gave for God’s work and glory were many of the very same items that were used to build the golden calf. **Friends, with God, everything gets used. Everything – including those objects of sinfulness and brokenness and waywardness – everything is redeemed... is recycled – if you will – and transformed by God to be used for the work of God.**

And the list by no means ends with simply what the people have. The people give of their time, their talent, their craftsmanship, their energy, their devotion, and their knowledge. They gave fully of themselves and, as verse 29 describes it, they offered their gifts and gave of themselves as “**a free will offering to the Lord.**”

A free will offering... They gave of their time and their talents – **freely** - for God’s glory and so that God’s work could be done. Out of their thanks... from their gratitude for all that God had done for them... **they gave.**

And God calls us to do the same: to live lives of thankfulness by making our lives a gift to God; by presenting our bodies – our gifts and graces – our pocketbooks and our prayers – our skills, our time, our talents... our daily bread – as a living sacrifice – holy and acceptable to God. **Dear fiends, brothers and sisters in Christ, that’s what it means to give thanks .**

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In this day and age, in this difficult and uncertain time when everyone gathered here this morning, I am certain, knows someone who has been deeply affected in some way by the recent – and ongoing - economic crises in our nation and the world - **and perhaps that someone whom you know is... you** - it is easy and it is natural and it is understandable to become worried and discouraged and in the process to also become a little careful - **a little strategic, if you will** - on deciding how we give and how much we give.

In the ten verses that we have heard this morning from Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus speaks directly to this and speaks directly to us.

Jesus says, quite simply, “do not worry.” Don’t worry about what you will eat or what you will drink or what you will wear. God will provide. **God provides.**

When Jesus says this to us, he is doing more than merely giving us a pat on our backs. He’s doing far more than telling us, “chin up... keep a stiff upper lip... when the going gets tough, the tough get going.” Jesus is calling us to live by faith and not by sight alone.

Jesus knows our worries. Jesus knows – and Jesus understands – and Jesus is moved by our current troubles. **But Jesus also knows our temptations.** Jesus knows how we are perfectly capable of talking ourselves into anything, including doing nothing - or next to nothing.

In this Gospel passage, Jesus wants us to know that God is fully aware of our needs. And in this Gospel passage, Jesus calls us to both trust in God’s goodness and in doing so to seek God’s righteousness.

For God is good ... all the time. Great is God’s faithfulness. Morning by morning, God’s mercies we see. And God’s blessings we receive... grace upon grace... in our friends... in our families... in our work... in our homes... in our community... in the food on our table and the clothes on our backs and the roof over our heads.

God is good - all the time. And our best response to God’s grace-filled presence in our lives **is to give thanks**; and our best and only way to express that thanks **is to give**: with grateful hearts - and with willing... and joyful spirits - so that God’s work will be done, here on earth, here in this community, as it is in heaven. **Amen.**