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Sermon
November 24, 2013
Park Congregational Church
Worcester, Massachusetts

“Not For Granted”

Thanksgiving Sermon: 2 Timothy 3:1-7

Dear people of God, how easy it is to take things for granted. We live in a wonderful country where we enjoy many freedoms. We have a democratic government, where we the people get to choose who will rule over us. None of us needs to worry about where our next meal is coming from. We all have a roof over our heads and money in our pockets. It's true that some of us are not as well off as others, but compared to the overwhelming majority of people in the world, we are rich, and not just economically. We are blessed with friends, family, and a future.

In spite of all this, we're sometimes slow to acknowledge our blessings. Because we have grown so accustomed to them, we often take them for granted. It's very easy to do. Occasionally we need to be reminded of just what we have been taking for granted, and for what we need to be thankful. A holiday like Thanksgiving allows us to focus our attention on those things in life that really count.

Thanksgiving Day is a time when we look back on the blessings God has given to us, and a time when we look forward to the blessings we will continue to enjoy, not only in this life, but for eternity. Yes, we can confidently say that we will continue to enjoy blessings in the future. How do I know that? Can I predict the future? Of course not. No one can. But it's God's desire to bless us. Not that blessings will happen automatically. We must always remain faithful to God's Word for blessings to come. We must always act obediently out of our faith in order for blessings to continue. We can never enjoy the luxury of taking our blessings for granted. Such a luxury can very easily lead to ruin.

Thanksgiving, the day, reminds us of thanksgiving, the attitude. What we need to cultivate is the attitude of thanksgiving, the attitude of gratitude. More than ever, Americans need to foster an attitude of thanksgiving, for we live in a time of ingratitude. We live in a time when everyone feels entitled. We're told that we're entitled to a guaranteed income. We're told we're entitled to complete health care. We're told we're entitled to a new car every few years. Our grandparents didn't feel this way. Because they lived through the Great Depression. They knew what it was like to struggle. They knew what it was like to be poor. A

poor person rarely takes anything for granted. It's certainly good that we have become a prosperous nation, but the downside to that is the temptation to take our prosperity and privileges for granted. Not that the attitude of taking things for granted is anything new. Aristotle over 2000 years ago said, "What soon grows old? Gratitude."

The author of the Second Letter of Timothy in the New Testament talked about how people in his own day were "lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, implacable, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" (2 Timothy 3:2-4). What a mouthful! How many of these descriptions characterize people today? I hope that none of those terms describes any of you. Certainly one of the characteristics mentioned in this litany of bad qualities widespread today is "ungrateful." People today tend to be ungrateful.

Why is that? People seem to like to complain. Lawsuits and litigation today in America have reached epidemic proportions. One medical survey, in fact, states that chronic complainers actually live longer than those who are always sweet and sincere. It claims that their

cantankerous spirit gives them a purpose for living. Each morning they arise with a fresh challenge to see how many things they can grumble about and how many people they can make miserable. We hear sometimes about such people that they're too mean to die. Do you know anyone like that? Personally, I doubt the findings of this survey. It's very questionable to me that those who complain actually outlive those who don't. Maybe it just seems that way to those who must live with them.

None of us likes to be around complainers. Therefore, none of us should want to be a complainer. Samuel Johnson said, "Gratitude is a fruit of great cultivation; you do not find it among gross people." Do any of us want to be gross? I know that our youth don't. We often hear them say about something they dislike, "Ooo! That's gross!" I don't think any of us want to be gross. I would think that all of us would rather be thankful. Knowing that Jesus Christ loves us and has redeemed us through his life, death, and resurrection in order to secure our eternal happiness should especially make us thankful.

What is the basis for true thanksgiving? Well, in order to be thankful, we must be grateful for something and to someone. We should certainly show our gratitude to other persons for their presence in our

life. But our gratefulness must go beyond thanking mere mortals. It has been said that the atheist's most embarrassing moment is when he feels profoundly thankful for something, but can't think of anybody to thank for it. The real basis for giving thanks is found in a transcendent reality.

The early Pilgrims had many difficult days in settling this new land. Governor William Bradford of Massachusetts made the first Thanksgiving proclamation three years after the Pilgrims settled at Plymouth. He said, and I quote,

Inasmuch as the Great Father has given us this year an abundant harvest of Indian corn, wheat, peas, beans, squashes, and garden vegetables, and has made the forest to abound with game and the sea with fish and clams, and inasmuch as God has protected us from the ravages of the savages, has spared us from pestilence and disease, has granted us freedom to worship God according to the dictates of our own conscience. Now I, your magistrate, do proclaim that all you Pilgrims, with your wives and ye little ones, do gather at ye meeting house, on ye hill, between the hours of nine and twelve in the daytime, on Thursday, November 29th, in the year of our Lord 1623, and the 3rd year since ye Pilgrims landed on ye Pilgrim Rock, there to listen to ye pastor and render thanksgiving to ye Almighty God for all of our blessings.

William Bradford
Ye Governor of Ye Colony

Those early Pilgrims recognized that the provisions they had experienced came from God. They were thankful, and they didn't hide the fact that

they were thankful to Almighty God.

But they were thankful not only for material blessings and for providential safekeeping. They were thankful especially for the greatest gift that God gave to them, Jesus Christ. Christ is the real basis for all thanksgiving. The gift of Christ, eternal life in God's presence, is the greatest gift that anyone can receive. God sent Jesus to us because God loves us. Yes, you and I, who often act without love. God showed that love to us when Jesus died on the cross for our sins so that we could be reconciled to God, and be free to live a life of gratitude. Yes, gratitude is true freedom. We find liberation in gratitude. No longer must we wonder if God loves us. God has demonstrated the divine love beyond doubt by giving Christ to us. No longer must we agonize over whether or not we're good enough to be accepted by God. God has already accepted us in Christ. We're already guaranteed eternal life in God's presence. We don't have to tally up our deeds and be in *angst* over whether the balance of good deeds over bad ones is favorable. We've already been accepted by God because Christ has exposed the folly of our sins by being willing to die on the cross as a sacrifice to end all sacrifices. He freed us so that we can now live a life of gratitude by not feeling the need for a scapegoat to

pay for our sins, but see the horror of what happened on the cross so that we don't repeat it.

This is what the Gospel is all about. Gospel means "good news." Those of us who have experienced the effects of this good news in our lives know the gratitude we feel toward God. How can we ever thank God enough? Surely human words fail to express adequately the overwhelming gratitude which wells up in our hearts.

It's very interesting that the Bible contains over 550 references to thankfulness. The Bible speaks of many benefits of gratitude. Perhaps the greatest is that thanksgiving has a powerful effect for bettering our lives. It changes us like almost nothing else can. Expressing thanksgiving truly makes us different.

We live in an ungrateful age. Look around you. Daily you'll see people who are bitter. Many of these are bitter, not because they don't have anything, but because they don't have everything. We've been well taught in our affluent society to be greedy and grasping. We're bombarded by advertisements that remind us of what we don't have. Christmas becomes a depressing time for many. We're led to believe that if we lack certain things, then we won't be able to experience happiness.

And so many people in our society are unhappy around Christmas because they buy into this false message.

Most unhappy people are unthankful people. At first glance, we might suppose that the reason they're unthankful is because they're unhappy. I don't think that's true. I think it's the opposite. They're unhappy because they're unthankful. Being genuinely thankful has the power to transform us into different people. We'll not only be different from those in our society, but we'll be different from the way we used to be. We'll be transformed. We'll be transformed in our thinking as well as in our disposition.

Our thinking will be changed because our minds will be programmed to think differently. Instead of concentrating on the negative, on what we lack, we'll concentrate on the positive, on what we already have. We'll be able to find the good in everything. No situation is so bad that no good can be found in it. When we find the good, we can build upon it and make it better. To put this in theological terms, no evil is so great that God cannot bring some redemption out of it. We should remember that God took the most evil event in human history, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and brought the greatest redemption out of it, our salvation. The

crucifixion ought not to have happened, but it did; and because it did, the greatest blessing has been bestowed upon us: eternal life.

How many things do we take for granted? If we were to take the time to write down everything for which we're thankful, we could perhaps fill an entire notebook. We heard last Sunday during Children's Time some of the things for which our Sunday School children are thankful. They were asked in Sunday School class to write 10 things for which they were thankful. Some of them wrote as many as 30 things and would still have written more, but class time ran out.

But even more than our thinking, when we start to get into the habit of showing gratitude, our disposition will change for the better. We will find it instinctive to be pleasant and good-natured. Irritable people are those who take things for granted in their lives. They suppose that reality is at their beck and call. Even little annoyances anger them. The TV remote is not where they left it, and so, they'll spend half an hour cursing while they look for it, instead of the few seconds it takes to go and turn the television on manually. Is the anger and cursing worth it? Is it worth getting upset? Maybe your wife was straightening up and she had to move the remote to another place. Instead of being angry at her,

maybe you should thank her for keeping the living room or the den tidy and clean.

Attitude makes all the difference. Do we want to have an ungrateful or a thankful attitude? Do we want to take things for granted, which is the lazy and shameful way, or do we want to show appreciation for even the little things that make our life more pleasant?

The Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard asserted that when a person

knows more thoroughly than a child knows the alphabet that he can demand of life absolutely nothing, and that terror, perdition, annihilation dwell next door to every man, and has learned the profitable lesson that every dread which alarms may the next instant become a fact, he will then interpret reality differently; he will extol reality, and even when it rests upon him heavily, he will remember that after all, it is far, far lighter than the possibility was. (The Concept of Anxiety)

What Kierkegaard is saying in his philosophical way is that we must never take life for granted, because it could always have been worse. We can always imagine the possibility of something worse than our actual situation.

Not taking life for granted. It's difficult to do. But we must try as best we can. Thanksgiving, you see, is really the only thing that we can

truly give to God. Everything we possess in life has been given to us by God. But offering thanksgiving is something uniquely human that we can offer to God as a genuine gift. Amen.