

“Thanksgiving”

Deuteronomy 8:7-18;

2 Corinthians 9:6-15; Luke 17:11-19

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It is good to be back. There is something about going away for some time that lets you take a moment and think about a lot of different things. Even taking a break around Thanksgiving gives us a moment to think about our lives, to think back, and to think what we're thankful for. Going to Nicaragua, of course, gave some of us real contrasts to think about. We had different food—we didn't have turkey on Thanksgiving. We had different weather—hot and humid, not cold and rainy. There were some differences in living conditions that we saw. We saw some real poverty. We don't see it quite as clearly here. Maybe it's here, but we don't see it quite as clearly.

As we thought about those things, one of our group mentioned that one difference that he saw between us and the Nicaraguans was that while we both have dreams and expectations for our lives, it just seems a little easier for us. Our dreams and expectations aren't as far away from us as it seemed for some of the villagers with whom we were spending our time.

All those differences and contrasts allowed us to think about our lives. We came back wanting to remember some of those differences. It wasn't just that we were thinking about what we left behind and the contrast there. In fact, it wasn't just about being different; it was noticing the gifts we received from our stay in Nicaragua—the gifts of hospitality, friendship in the midst of a very different kind of place. We came back wanting to remember some of those things as well.

So what do we do when we want to remember something? We often take pictures. We take pictures so we can remember and think about something. When we take pictures and look at them again, it is a way of helping us remember, a way of thinking about what has been, and we can think about the gifts we have been given. For those of us who traveled to Nicaragua, we can look at those pictures and think about the gifts we encountered there. Some of you may have taken pictures on Thanksgiving with family so you can remember and be thankful for the gift of being together.

There are all kinds of times and ways of remembering and thinking about our gifts. One of the things I have noticed, however, is that it sometimes takes a break, going away, to actually notice some things. Sometimes looking at old pictures reminds me again of people and experiences which, when I notice and remember, elicit gratitude.

In this passage Jesus is talking to some lepers. They encounter him and experience a healing and then most of them just go on. What I'm thinking about there is how easy it is to not take the picture, to not remember, to not notice, and to just go on. There is almost an expectation—He's a prophet; I'm healed; that's what's supposed to happen—and they go on. It makes me wonder how many times in our own lives we don't even really notice the good that happens in our lives because that's what's supposed to happen, and we just go on.

One of the things this trip allowed me to think about was how often we just go on, but also that in the midst of all the contrasts, in the midst of all of our lives, we each have our own unique lives and go our own separate ways a lot of the time. Yet, there's something that is common to all of us. It's one of those things that really struck me in going to another place and recognizing that in spite of all the differences, there's something that is common to all of us.

This trip brought up again and helped me remember that God so loved the *whole world* that he gave his Son. No matter where we are, that love is available and present, and we are called to love God with our heart, mind and soul, and our neighbors as ourselves. It's not something that we leave in one place when we go to another. You take off in a plane and land somewhere else, and you see all the differences, but you don't leave the love of God behind. In fact, one of the pastors there said to me, "Welcome. We are brothers and sisters in Christ." It is central to who we are. It's what brings us all together and what we can truly be thankful for. Perhaps we need prompts like pictures or a trip to remember that that love embraces us all.

It is, in fact, in the remembering that I think there is something really important. The one leper who returns, who comes back to Jesus, is acknowledging that he has been given that indescribable gift of grace, that surprising gift of love from God. It's not just that he's been healed. It's not just that his skin is now clean. All of them got that gift. In his coming back, he knows a fullness that I don't think the others got to experience. Do you notice what Jesus says to that one that comes back? He says, "Your faith has made you well." I think there's a difference between being cleansed, being healed, and being well. We get healed of something. If I have a cut on my finger, over time it will heal. Does it change my life? Well, it's nice not to have that little cut, but what does it say about my life? We could be healed of something for the moment, but what matters is what goes forward. As this man reencounters Jesus, Jesus says, "Your faith has made you well." "Saved you" would be another way of saying it, actually; rescued you, brought you out of the place you have been into that new place.

It's when we allow ourselves to both recognize that indescribable gift, the surpassing gift of grace, and allow it not only to enter our lives, but respond to it,

that we get into right relationship with God. There's a fullness that happens in thanksgiving and praise. There's a fullness to life, a wellness, that occurs. As we live our lives, we can go to the doctor and be healed of a particular illness, but we can still live lives that are not what I would call well. But if we live our lives in a way that pays attention to what allows us to be healthy, there's a wellness. That's what Jesus is encouraging here when this man comes back and says, "Praise God!" In that full circle, there is a wellness and that is ours.

So as we go forward from this remembering of Thanksgiving, if we take some pictures of our lives, what would they be? What I encourage you to do is that until Christmas, try to take three snapshots each day, not literally, but to think about what three things have happened to me this day that I can be thankful for. How have I seen the grace of God at work in my life this day? It's a way of coming full circle with God. It's part of being in right relationship with God. It's part of the harvest of righteousness that we have when we allow ourselves not only to see the grace, but to say thanks for it. I think it's easy to live each day and only look at the hard things, the struggles, and forget about what I could be thankful for this day. What are three things that you can be thankful for each day? How do you see the grace of God at work in your own life?

Gracious God, there are a variety of ways that you enter into our lives. Sometimes it's through a break, a trip. Sometimes it's through a moment with others that we remember, we notice. Sometimes it's a photograph that opens our eyes again to a memory. Sometimes you come with us in a way that we can see. In each of these ways, Lord, we recognize you enter into our lives. As you give us the indescribable, surpassing gift of grace you show us that you love us and all your people. Lord, go with us. Help us notice and remember each day how you are present among us. Lord, we are thankful that you have given us your grace. Let us be a thankful people. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.