

The Secret of Saying Thanks

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Deuteronomy 8:7-18; Luke 17:11-19

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I've got a secret. Is there a more enticing, more intriguing phrase in the English language? I've got a secret! Hearing those words, both the child on the playground at school and the grownup in Starbuck's will perk up their ears and lean forward to hear what comes next. We are fascinated by secrets. The television game show of the same name had a run of fifteen years in the 1950s and 60s. Witness the current popularity of the website PostSecret and the print books it has generated. PostSecret tells the "extraordinary secrets of ordinary people." Submissions are true secrets never before shared with anyone, arranged in words and images on the back of a homemade postcard, mailed in anonymously. The secrets include regrets, hopes, confessions, fears and fantasies.

Some secrets stay safely hidden, never to be revealed. Whatever secrets I know about Mike and Sue after 23 years of friendship are not to be shared here in this forum; not when they have just as much knowledge of my mistakes, weaknesses, and embarrassing moments!

The world is indeed full of secrets. The best secrets are the ones that make us glad, and the best thing about any secret is being able to share it with someone else who wants to know. Today's secret falls in that category. It is a truth and a fact worth paying attention to in our lives as disciples. If you are given to reading sermon titles, you've already been given a clue: it is the secret of saying thanks.¹

Let's come at this secret through the scriptures we've heard today. The passage from Deuteronomy is certainly relevant to Americans in 2006. It cautions us against spiritual amnesia, especially when we are experiencing abundance in material blessings. "Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this

wealth.’ But remember the Lord your God, for it is God who gives you the power to get wealth.” It is a necessary correction to our tendency to pat ourselves on the back when things go well – but blame God if they go wrong. The Old Testament lesson won’t let us off the hook - don’t forget about God – don’t forget that everything we have is a gift from God; everything that we have belongs to God; we are the stewards and the managers of these things that God owns.

The best lesson I ever had in matters of stewardship came early in my marriage. At the time that we were married, my husband Vern was living with and caring for his 89 year old grandfather in the old family homestead in New Britain, Connecticut – the house that Vern’s great-grandfather had built. George had already lived there more than sixty years, and we were not about to suggest any other living arrangement, so I moved in. Gramp Baker died within the first year of our marriage, and we remained in the Concord Street house for four years. We did not own the house, but we had responsibility for it. We understood clearly that the house was on loan to us, and that we were taking care of it on the family’s behalf; indeed, two more brothers lived in the house after us! Instead of paying the mortgage, we replaced the roof, fixed the driveway, updated the kitchen, repainted and redecorated. We were the stewards of the Concord Street home. We were the managers, but not the owners.

It was great practice in remembering that we are always stewards and that God is the owner of all that we have – even when our name is on a title or a deed! After all, we can’t hold on to what is not ours to begin with.

One confirmation class was given stickers to take home and put on all their belongings: the stickers read “This belongs to Jesus.” They were instructed to put the stickers on their CDs, their bikes, their video games, on all that was precious to them. Can you imagine receiving the same assignment? What if we put “This belongs to God” stickers on our computers, our credit cards, our cars, even our calendars- electronic or printed – to remind us that our possessions and tools, our money and our time, all belong to God and should be managed in ways that please God?

The New Testament lesson also has something to say about the secret of saying thanks. It's the story of ten lepers – the most feared group of outcasts in Jesus' day – who are healed with just a word from Jesus. Nine of them continue on their way to the priests for confirmation of their healing, and then joyfully return to life among the living, their entire world restored, their normal life returned. Only one thinks to come back to Jesus to say thank you for the miracle of healing and restoration – only one. Remarkably, that one is a Samaritan, a despised outsider. As a Samaritan leper, he would have been twice scorned, twice rejected, twice removed from the community. But after being healed, he returns to praise God, to acknowledge the healer, and to express his profound gratitude.

Again, I think there is a contemporary connection between our lives and the scripture reading. I wonder if the other nine lepers did not return because, once healed, they fell into the mindset that they were, after all, entitled to health. I agree with our UCC President John Thomas, who states that part of the illness of today is a deeply ingrained sense of entitlement, the notion that we are somehow entitled to things, that we owe no one anything and have no responsibility for anyone.² I appreciate the expression that states 'some people are born on third base, but they grow up thinking they hit the triple to get there.' It is difficult to appreciate what we have when we think we are only getting what is rightfully ours; and it is all too easy to complain about what we lack if we think we are not getting our due. This is a deep self-centeredness that replaces concern for the community with a preoccupation with our own needs.

The antidote to entitlement is genuine gratitude. When we are grateful, we are expressing our trust in God and our dependence on God for everything – we are remembering that what we have has come as a gift. The other nine lepers keep their distance; they retain the myth of entitlement and the arrogance of independence. But the Samaritan crosses the distance and throws himself at Jesus' feet – a gesture of humility and intimacy, an acknowledgement of dependence on God.

The leper figured it out. The secret to wholeness and full healing is saying thanks. The secret was revealed in a surprisingly secular source several years ago, from a

Boston Globe columnist. The Thanksgiving column, written by Jeff Jacoby, was titled “The Power of Giving Thanks.”³ He begins by wondering if we, having endured the year of heartbreak and tragedy that the Pilgrims had, would have felt grateful, and goes on to say that gratitude has an extraordinary power to improve our lives. Quoting the psalm that it is good to give thanks to the Lord, Jacoby declares that it is not that God needs our gratitude, but that we need it. He writes, “Learning to be thankful, whether to God or to other people, is the best vaccination against taking good fortune for granted. And the less you take for granted, the more pleasure and joy life will bring you. Become grateful and you will become a much happier person.”

I couldn't agree more. The heart that gives thanks is a happy one; it is difficult to feel thankful and unhappy at the same time. But gratitude is a starting point, not an end unto itself. When we are grateful, we are also generous. Gifts that are hoarded and selfishly accumulated can have a crippling, paralyzing effect on us, but the generosity that comes from a thankful heart is the way to spiritual maturity and depth.

Episcopal priest John Claypool tells the story of visiting two church members in the hospital on the same day. “Each was in her eighties, and each faced daunting medical challenges. The first began a catalog of complaints the moment I entered. She said, “I hate being in the hospital. I hate having to be away from my home. Things are so busy and noisy here I can't sleep at night. The bed sheets feel like they are made of sandpaper. The food here is awful.” I tried to listen to her with empathy, prayed with her, reminded her that her community of faith was praying for her. But nothing that I could say seemed to change those negative reactions. To be honest, I left her room a bit depressed myself because I was powerless to do anything to make her feel any better.

“I braced myself to have to go through this same kind of complaining with the second visit. I said, “I'm sorry to find you in the hospital.” She said, “Well, I'm sorry, too, but I have some problems that my family cannot handle. I'm really grateful there are places like this where I'm going to be able to get some help.” I said, “I guess you find it hard to rest in the hospital with all the coming and going.” She said, “You know, my

family works during the day and I frankly get lonely. I love all the interaction between the nurses and these wonderful young students that are here. Every time the door opens I look forward to meeting a new friend.” I said, “I guess it’s pretty hard to sleep on a hospital bed.” She said, “Do you know what? We just change the sheets at home once a week. They change them here every day! I call that real luxury, don’t you?” Well, I made one more try. I said, “I suppose the food here in the hospital is not the same as what you have at home.” She said, “You know, my daughter-in-law is a wonderful cook but she cooks the same food the same way and, sometimes, I get a little bit bored. I love the variety here in the hospital. To be honest with you, eating anything is a difficulty to me because I only have two teeth left, but, thank the Lord, they hit!” When she said those words, I felt like stepping back and giving her a full military salute! Here was a person who was choosing to be grateful for things that were going well for her and her gratitude made all the difference in the world.”⁴

Most of us have more to be grateful for than any people in the history of the world. We have more than enough to eat, comfortable places to live, good work to do, families and friends to enjoy, activities and arts that enrich our lives – and yet so many of us feel unsatisfied, greedy, grouchy, ungrateful. We need to learn the secret of saying thanks. The more we say thanks, the more we find to be thankful for. And the more we find to be thankful for, the happier we become. We don’t give thanks because we’re happy. We are happy because we give thanks.

This is Consecration Sunday, a day to acknowledge that all we have comes from God and belongs to God. This is a day to acknowledge that we have a need to give, a longing to show and say our thanks, a desire to demonstrate our trust that God will provide what we need and that we will be content with whatever God provides. This is a day to be faithful as we say thanks.

The Apostle Paul knew the secret. He writes in Philippians, “I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I have learned to be content with whatever I have.” The Deuteronomist knew the secret of

remembering our dependence on God, who gives us all things. The leper knew the secret of expressing deep gratitude and thanksgiving.

On this Consecration Sunday, do you know the secret?

¹ Inspired by the children's book, The Secret of Saying Thanks, by Douglas Wood.

² John Thomas, "Gratitude is More than Saying Thanks," *Day 1*, October 10, 2004.

³ Jeff Jacoby, "The Power of Giving Thanks," *The Boston Globe*, November 23, 2000.

⁴ John Claypool, "Ambiguity and Gratitude," *Chicago Sunday Evening Club*, aired October 19, 2003.