

Date: November 23, 2003

**SUNDAY:** Thanksgiving

**SERMON: Thanks for the Memories**

Text(s): Deuteronomy 8:7-20; Matthew 6:25-33

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During my freshman year in college, my roommate was my mother's youngest brother who, because he was only a few years older than I, was more like a brother than an uncle. Bill had a beat-up old '55 Ford in which we used to drive the 400 miles from our home in Western Pennsylvania to college in Kentucky. When I think now about the number of those trips we made in that old green monster, it's enough to give me more gray hairs than what I've already got, but when you're young and in college, you'll do almost anything without thinking of the consequences.

On most of those trips, we gave rides to other people who lived along our route, and the usual arrangement was that they would help pay for the gas. One of the fellows that used to ask us for a ride whenever we were going home or returning was a guy named Frank who lived about halfway across Ohio. Frank was a classic ingrate. He always managed to welch out of paying his share of the gas money. Twice one semester, when we had arrived back on campus, Frank hopped out of the car and said to my uncle, "Thanks for the ride, Bill." And that would be it. We wouldn't hear from him until the next time we planned a trip home and Frank would come and ask if he could ride along.

My uncle was a patient enough guy, but after getting burned by Frank's ingratitude twice, he was getting a little peeved. He made up his mind that if Frank didn't cough up some gas money this time, it would be Frank's last free ride. Sure enough, just as he had done the last two times, Frank hopped out of the car, said "Thanks Bill," and started toward his dorm. This time, Bill responded rather sharply, "I can't put thanks in the bank, Frank."

Ingratitude is really frustrating, isn't it? Woe betide the newlywed couple who are not

prompt enough in getting their thank-you notes written. Their gift-giving friends and relatives are miffed, and their parents are mortally embarrassed. We don't always want a reward when we do something for someone, but we like to have what we've done acknowledged in some way. It helps us to feel our efforts were appreciated and not wasted. And yet all of us have undoubtedly offended others by not showing gratitude for favors received. Usually our lapses aren't intentional, but often the result of insensitivity or preoccupation with something more pressing. We neglect to say "thank you," and then the person who has done us the service or given us the gift goes around feeling more or less exploited or unappreciated.

Failing to show gratitude is a very common and very ancient human failing. In our Old Testament lesson this morning, which is cast in the form of a sermon by Moses to the people of Israel, we hear Moses warning the people about the dangers of forgetting to be grateful for all the blessings they have received from God's hand. He's speaking to them on the eve of their entry into the land of Canaan after forty years of nomadic existence in the desert.

*"Beware,"* Moses tells them, *"lest you forget the Lord your God, when you have eaten and are full, when you have built fine houses and dwell in them and your wealth is multiplied. Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power, and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.' You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the power to get wealth."*

I'm glad, that America has a national day set aside to remember and give thanks for the blessings we've received. On Thursday, millions of Americans will mark the occasion in the traditional way. We'll begin by stuffing a turkey and later we'll sit down at an overloaded table to stuff ourselves with the turkey, operating, I suppose, on the principle first articulated by Mae West, that "too much of a good thing is wonderful." We here at First Parish certainly have much to be thankful for this year; I heard a

lot of expressions of gratitude at the celebration we had here Friday afternoon after the roof went back on the tower. I hope we're still feeling thankful two years from now when the final bills come due.

Yet I can't help suspecting that, despite our national Thanksgiving Day, for much of the rest of the year, thanksgiving is not in the forefront of our minds. We've worked hard to earn a good living; we've been thrifty and saved up to buy a house or pay for our children's college educations. Few of us were born with gold spoons in our mouths. What we've got we've achieved through hard work, a few lucky breaks, and a fair amount of ambition. And while we may feel thankful, we are largely thanking ourselves for being the deserving people we are. *"My power, and the might of my hand, have gotten me this wealth."* Even if we, on this one day a year, acknowledge God's part in our blessings, that acknowledgment tends to disappear about as soon as the last remnants of the turkey are picked off the bones and the last slice of pumpkin pie has been eaten. And by limiting our thankfulness to one day a year, we lose much of the power that thanksgiving could have for our lives.

We lose the power, for instance, to live free of the kind of anxiety about life that Jesus speaks of in that passage from the Sermon on the Mount we heard today. Anxiety about life is the natural by-product of ingratitude. It is a kind of atheism, in fact. Our constant concern and preoccupation with *"what we will eat and what we will drink and what we will wear,"* does not point to our trust in a God who knows our needs and who has promised to supply all these needs if we will but set our priorities on living under his sovereign and gracious rule. Instead, anxiety about these things betrays the deep-rooted fear that we are alone in this world, orphaned, and dependent upon our own grit rather than upon God's grace. Anxiety about life does not even correlate closely with how much or how little we

have of life's necessities. Sometimes, in fact, the more we have, the more anxious we become, for in addition to the worry that we never have enough, is added the worry about preserving and hoarding what we do have.

Ingratitude also costs us the ability to be compassionate. One of the best examples of this was a story told by former *New York Times* columnist, Russell Baker. I still miss his presence on the op ed page. His barbed political commentary was so well-wrapped in humor and elegant writing that most of today's columnists seem rather shrill by comparison. He wrote of walking down the street in New York and being encountered by a beggar who asked him for a dollar to help him get to San Diego for the winter. Baker gave the man a dollar, and then took note of the reactions of people around him. He said that he immediately became the object of ridicule. Passers-by smirked and gave each other knowing glances that passed a negative judgment on his act of charity. On the other hand, Baker said, he's quite sure that if he had forked over \$10.00 for a ticket to sit in a dark and uncomfortable and dirty movie theater for two hours watching the latest foreign film with English subtitles, no one would have thought badly of him at all; to the contrary he would have been considered a cultured person. But helping to fuel a beggar's dreams of warm San Diego for a dollar was judged an act of utter naïveté and waste.

To be sure, when a hurricane devastates a coastal city or when an earthquake strikes a Central American country, we respond with great generosity in giving to the relief of those in need. But compassion is hard to sustain when it is only awakened by crises. To be sustained, it has to be a habit of life, and that is only possible when we live day in and day out as thankful people.

The cure for ingratitude is memory. Moses' word to Israel was, *"When you come into the land which the Lord your God has given you, remember. . ."* Remember. Remember where you came from. Remember how you got here.

Remember what sacrifices others made so that you could enjoy what you now have. Remember who is the rightful lord of the manor. Remember.

The road to thankfulness is paved with memory. Thankfulness, even for the people of God, doesn't appear to be a natural human response. It has to be continually practiced until it becomes a way of life. That is why, in both Jewish and Christian worship, remembrance plays such a central role. In both the Passover liturgy and in the liturgy of our communion prayer that we call "The Great Thanksgiving," we perform a recital of God's saving actions in our behalf, and we recall that history of God's faithfulness into our present experience. In fact, the more formal name for the communion service is the Eucharist, which is simply the Greek word for giving thanks. Remembering God's mercies, reminds us of who we are. Remembering God reminds us, as the Psalmist says, that, "*It is God who has made us, and not we ourselves.*"

Cultivating the habit of remembering God's help and blessings in the past would free us to a large extent from present anxieties about life. When difficult or painful experiences or times of uncertainty and self-doubt come along, as they do for all of us, we would not immediately panic and begin to fret and stew about our future. Instead, like the prophet Samuel, who in the face of an overwhelming force of enemies, reminded God's people, "*Thus far, the Lord has helped us,*" we could gain peace of mind and perspective by remembering God's past faithfulness.

Recovering our memories would also free up within us the springs of compassion that are often dammed up by those very anxieties about life. When we are not driven by anxiety about our own life, we can be free to reach out to others who are going through hard times and become a source of help and blessing.

In my parish in New Brunswick, NJ, we took our regular turn working in the soup kitchen run by the churches. It was a Friday night, and so it was our church's turn to cook and serve the

meal to about 100 homeless people. I was running the dishwasher in the kitchen, and a man I didn't know came along and began unloading the clean dishes from the racks so that I could concentrate on loading the dirty ones. I introduced myself to him and asked him who he was and why he had come to help in the soup kitchen. He told me his name, and the fact that he had emigrated from Central America a few years before. He said, "Last year, I lost my job, and I couldn't provide for my family. So every night, we came here to eat dinner, because we couldn't afford to buy food. The people of the churches of this town helped us and kept us from despairing. Now I have a new job; I'm providing for my family once again, and I want to give something back. So whenever I can, I come here to work in the soup kitchen."

There's a man who knows how to remember. That's thanksgiving.