

### THE OPPOSITE OF THANKSGIVING

--A few days more and we may be seated around someone's big table (maybe our own), joined by a number of family or special friends, feasting on more food in one meal than the average Afghan or African has seen in the past week.

As the national holiday goes, this Thanksgiving may have us wondering a bit what exactly we have to be thankful for. Other years, there were the usual, obvious blessings for which we could express our gratitude, even if only perfunctorily. But this year, given what is going on in our country, we may be experiencing a degree of perturbation and anxiety, such that focusing our eyes and hearts on the grace shown to us may be a far more complicated task.

The national news these days seems to be one long litany of accusativeness, paranoia, and acrimony. I'm not sure when America has ever been so contentiously divided-down-the-middle as it is now. It's no easy thing to feel grateful or generous when all around us there is so much rancor.

Given this very state of things, however, this may be a very good year to remember and to practice the fundamentals involved in what is supposed to be the celebrating in our annual Thanksgiving observances. If ever there were a time for us to get vitally back in touch with the roots that sustain us, perhaps it is now.

--One way by which to do that is to clarify, in so many words, what Thanksgiving's opposite is. We may understand something best by understanding clearly what it is not. In light of this morning's reading from Luke, three things stand out in this regard.

(1) Thanksgiving fundamentally entails a recognition of those aspects of one's life which can be identified as blessings.

We are alive, have our health, have family and friends. We have shelter over our heads, fresh water to drink, and in our refrigerators and pantries all the food that we could want. We have jobs with challenges enough for a lifetime, or retirements with security. We have health benefits which will kick in should we require them, and interesting and enlivening hobbies to pursue in our off hours. We have our permanent residences in one of the richest, free-est nations in the world, and we can raise our families and live out our days in safety and prosperity. We have, in short, what 90% of the world can never hope to enjoy.

All that being said, none of this does us any good at Thanksgiving time, if we are asleep to any part of our state of grace. The opposite of Thanksgiving, you see, is not simply unappreciativeness. It is blindness--not really perceiving what is there.

"One of [the lepers], when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice" (17.15). He saw! Thanksgiving requires this seeing.

(2) Thanksgiving is never an end in itself. It is not given to us as an occasion on which we are to gloat over what we have and what others lack, let alone what we have at the expense of others. To react to our abundance in terms of any smug, self-righteous opinion that, among nations, God must love us best, and that we deserve everything that we have, while others, through no fault of their own save being born elsewhere, continue to go without even the basic necessities--that would be a serious error.

The opposite of Thanksgiving, you see, is not just self-indulgent unthankfulness. It is a patent lack of humility and compassion. To see plainly that the surplus that we have and the basics that others need is supposed to stop us and turn us around, is supposed to reorient us so that we might meaningfully open our bounty to them as well. It is no doubt among the greatest tests to be numbered among the world's small percentage of "have's" and, in some positive fashion, to resolve the question of whether to share any part of it with anyone else.

"One of [the lepers], when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice." He turned himself around! Thanksgiving invariably entails this responsiveness--to the Divine Giver, to be sure, and to others who cry out for some legitimate giving-to.

(3) As it is customarily observed, Thanksgiving is a time of great activity--active preparations in the kitchen, sometimes for days beforehand; the gathering of the tribe, including the smallest, busiest, noisiest members (you know, the three-footers!); the inevitable talking and laughing that are part of the eating and the visiting. Thanksgiving is not a subdued occasion. Typically it is energized in a remarkable variety of ways which set it apart from virtually every other day of the year.

The opposite of Thanksgiving, you see, is not merely ungratefulness. It is apathy, which means literally "no feeling"; it is inertia; which is a lack of vitality. The opposite of Thanksgiving is about insensitivity; it is tantamount to being dead. Those who are alive know to be thankful; those who are thankless characteristically are rather lifeless as well.

"One of [the lepers], when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice." He loudly praised God! If there's no exuberance, if there's no conspicuous joyfulness, then there's probably not much thanksgiving, either.

--If nothing else, this year we may have learned that appropriate thanksgiving is not dependent upon external events all going our way. The truth of the matter is that, when that occurs--when things go too smoothly, too easily, for too long--we may be hard-pressed to experience or to express the depth or genuineness of gratitude. We can, you know, so easily take our blessings for granted.

"Were not ten cleansed?" Jesus asks. "Where are the nine?"

The fact is that, as has been just outlined, the nine may well all be blind, or lacking heart, or, in their apathy and inertia, are simply incapable of response.

I trust that you do not see yourself among any of them . . . . Or do you?

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