

“Thanks Giving”

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I've been hearing it more and more lately.

In casual conversation.

In professional settings.

Even at home.

Used to be, when someone asked “how are you?” The standard, polite, not-really-thinking-about-it answer was, “Fine,” or “Good, thanks, and you?”

But these days, it seems more and more of us are answering the question differently.

How are you? Someone will ask.

“Busy!” We reply.

Everyone is so very busy these days. Busy at work. Busy at home. Long days filled with activity, plans, agenda items, and to-dos.

Before one thing is finished, we're thinking about, working for, worrying about the next three things on the list.

So it goes this year, as the economic crisis morphs into our economic everyday. As the job market shrinks. As offices and retailers and employers ask three people to do the work of 10 as a matter of course.

We are all just so busy.

And as the holidays approach, I know I, at least, have been feeling this rising sense of guilt. Maybe you feel it too. This feeling that no matter what's going on, no matter what pressure or pain might be going on in your life, the holidays must be perfect.

In just a few short days, I will be sitting at a large table in my Grandmother's home, feasting on a large plate of turkey and/or ham surrounded by mashed potatoes, gravy, green bean casserole, and my Great-Aunt Bernice's scalloped oysters.

As much as I am looking forward to seeing my extended family, I can't help but think about all of the things that need to get done before this event can happen. The shopping, the cooking, the decorating, the traveling.

How am I this week? Busy! And what really makes my head spin is that in the midst of the chaos, I know that what I really need to focus on is gratitude. What am I grateful for within these busy, busy times?

Our gospel text for the day is the story of Jesus healing 10 lepers. As we just heard, Jesus is approached by 10 lepers, who ask for healing.

As you may remember, leprosy was far more than just a physical ailment in Jesus' day. It was just as much a social disease, for if you were diagnosed with leprosy, or any sort of skin blemish, you were separated from the rest of society.

You weren't allowed to reside with your families, or share in meals with them anymore. You couldn't own a business or work anywhere. You were barred from physical contact with anyone.

These 10 men were living in these restrictive, painful circumstances, when Jesus came walking by.

Immediately recognizing them, they cry out, begging for a new lease on life.

Jesus sends them to the priests, the ones with the recognized authority to declare them clean, thus restoring them to society once more.

As they go, they are made well. Nine continue on, following Jesus' directive to seek out the priests. One, however, turns back, to give thanks.

Many preachers and writers like to dramatize the stories of "the other nine." Where did they go? Why didn't they return?

The stories run from the dramatic to the mundane. Maybe one wanted to see his daughter he hadn't been able to visit for years. Maybe one wanted to start up his business again, and save his starving family. Maybe one meant to return, but by the time he was done with the priest, Jesus was gone.

All in all, it seems, these dramatizations all boil down to one simple reason the other nine did not come back... they were just too busy!

Some of you might remember the old Ma and Pa Kettle television series?

In a classic scene that was to be found in many of the episodes, Ma Kettle would bang the triangle on the porch, and from every corner and crevice around the yard hordes of screaming, yelling children would pour into the house fighting for a place at the table. Then Ma, in her best stentorian tones would holler, "Hold it!" and everyone would freeze in silence. Pa Kettle would roll his eyes heavenward, tip his hat, and say, "Much obliged." And immediately the melee began as abruptly as it had stopped.

It seems to me, that so many of us are so busy we forget to take even that short break in the chaos to just Give Thanks.

In a recent article on the topic, Edward Creagan, an oncologist and professor at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn. Is quoted as observing, "if you're thankful for someone, for something, even a phone call, you have reached out beyond yourself... Once the focus is off the self, there's great serenity."

And there's the piece that calls us to challenge.

In all of our busyness, in all of our running and striving and doing, how much of it is about us, and how much, if any of it, is truly about reaching beyond ourselves?

I know that gratitude journals have become a bit of a trend lately. And Oprah Winfrey, the queen of all media, is on record as a proponent of the personal benefits that giving thanks can bring into your life.

But I would argue that Thanks Giving is not just a solitary endeavor, meant to make our lives better. It is deeper and wider than that.

Thanks Giving is part of our faith journey. A way to step outside of ourselves and recognize the many gifts that have come our way. Not because we have worked hard, not because we deserve them, but because we are blessed by our creator.

Richard Fairchild writes:

When we give thanks as a community, as a family, we are reminded of all the good things and all the good people that we have been given or gifted with. We remember that we have been blessed, we remember that there is a greater good than ourselves - if only for a moment or a day.

Friends, if only for a moment or a day, let us take time to Give Thanks. We will eat at many tables this week. Some will gather with extended family and extra place settings, some will hunch over fast food at our desks as we finish one more report, some with the screaming noise of a young family, some with quiet solitude and memory. With the TV blaring, with conversation churning.

Wherever and whenever you sit down to eat this week, stop for just a moment to give some thanks. Let us recognize our connection to God and each other. Let us remember that there is more than just us.

Whether we share a length prayer, or a tip of the hat and a hearty "much obliged," let us stop being busy, and start the practice of Thanks Giving.

Amen.