

Thanksgiving Day – November 26, 2009
The Rev. Dr. Charles D. Bang

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's hard for me to believe that next May I will celebrate the 30th anniversary of my ordination. For all those 30 years, the gospel reading on Thanksgiving was the story of Jesus healing the ten lepers and the report that after having been healed, only one returned to give thanks. It seemed an appropriate reading for the National Day of Thanksgiving where more than 10,000 run in the Annual Turkey Trot and we have one of our lowest attended worship services in the calendar year. Add to that the fact that we are only one of a handful of churches that even hold a worship service on Thanksgiving and you can see why this text was chosen.

But lo and behold, when I looked at what the reading for this Thanksgiving was, it had changed. Thirty years of hearing Jesus speak in amazement that after having healed these ten life long suffering unfortunates, only one out of the ten who were cured of their leprosy saw fit to stop and return thanks to God for his miracle.

Thirty years of trying to craft a sermon that at one and the same time encourages the gathered congregation to give thanks, all the while realizing that the ones who needed to hear the message weren't there.

Thirty years of trying to reach a creative balance between guilt and gratitude and the text is finally gone. Praise God.

But be careful for what you wish. The text they gave us, which by the way is my favorite in all of Scripture, seems to be, at first glance, at odds with what the day has become. On a day when all we do is worry, the advice to stop worrying seems counter cultural. On a day that is the culmination of days if not weeks of preparation, thinking and concern, to hear Jesus tell us to chill out, is surprising.

In the Bang household this year, we are blessed to have 15 gathered at our table. Our two girls are home, my Mom is with us, our best friends have come in from out of town, Sarah's sweetheart, Pete and his parents will be with us and as always, our neighbors will join us at table this afternoon. Debby and I have been working on the house to get it ready for our guests and only yesterday did the furniture upon which they will sleep tonight arrive, that's cutting it pretty close. And only the day before the furniture arrived did the carpet get installed. Debby worked at school until late on Tuesday and was lucky to find the right sized turkey just yesterday afternoon. She cleaned the house, did the laundry, changed all the linens, set the table, went shopping, hid all the "stuff" I had laying around, and probably accomplished a hundred things I never even thought of. And she comes to church this morning, and her husband, who worked all day yesterday and didn't show up to help until dinner time, reads this, "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'" It's a good thing I'm hiding up here in my brass encircled fortress.

But you know as well as I that the point that Jesus was trying to get across to his disciples and followers had nothing to do with preparing for a major holiday and everything to do with the

attitude with which one approaches all of life. It's unfortunate that those who chose this particular passage of Scripture started the passage a little late and ended it a bit too early. The paragraph that precedes it reads, "No one can serve two masters, for a person will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." This sets the stage for the paragraph we heard read just a minute ago and removes the context from one of hospitality to one of orientation. What is important in your life, and which master do you chose to serve? While we spend a lot of time and energy making sure those with whom we celebrate the holiday are cared for and know, by our gestures of hospitality, that they are loved, it's not our life's work. But the warning exists to make sure that we do not get carried away in anything that pulls us away from God and what God tells us is important.

The passage also tells us to have faith in God and in God's goodness and love for us, and to rest in that knowledge and relinquish control to the One who takes care of all the things we hardly even think of. But we're not good about relinquishing control, are we? It's not easy to admit that we cannot control everything in our lives. We try to, we often think we can, until we can't, or something we can't control tell us otherwise. After all, it's somewhat humiliating to think that something as small as a microbial virus can put us out of business for two weeks, or worse, forever. That try as we might to take care of ourselves, sometimes illness finds us, or age sneaks up on us, or nature gangs up on us, or gravity wins.

The passage says, trust in God, no matter what the day brings.

The passage also ends too early. The short paragraph that follows it contains these words, "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." I believe one of the sayings we inherited from AA says, "Let go and let God." That doesn't mean you stop paddling, it doesn't mean you don't keep your powder dry, it doesn't mean you stop working with God, it just means you stop thinking that you're in charge and that God works for you.

Sometimes in the midst of all our striving and doing, we lose sight of whose creation it is. I heard just this past week from one of my pastor colleagues here in town. He recalled that the Archbishop of Canterbury had a sign above the exit to his study that he looked at each night as he left the building. It read, "Goodnight Lord, it's Your Church now." A good motto for any workaholic and a good reminder as to Who rules all of life. But it would have been better had the good archbishop posted the sign on the way IN to his study, in a place where he could have read it before he started the day, before he came into work and tried to save the world all by himself, before he had the opportunity to think himself important and that the fate of the world, or at least his portion of it, was up to him.

We gather this day, this special day, to remind ourselves of this, and to stop in our relentless pursuit of trying fool ourselves into thinking that we control anything and to turn our attitude of self-importance into an attitude of gratitude, because none of it is ours, all of it is God's and God gifts it to us for our use and to our care. Lord knows we could do a better job at both, let this be the first day in a string of many to come where we start the day and end the day with words of thanksgiving on our lips and in our hearts.

Amen.