

“Thanksgiving: Gratitude Vs Guilt?” // Joe Heikman
Wildwood Mennonite Church // 2018-10-07

Two Mennonites sat down at the Thanksgiving Dinner table and bowed their heads to pray...

Good God, what a feast! I mean, seriously, God is Good: look at this feast! Turkey, mashed potatoes and gravy, Mom’s homemade stuffing, sweet rolls, cranberry sauce, pickles and cheese, baked corn, green beans... and who knows what else is waiting for us at dessert time. As if I’ll have room for dessert. Hasn’t stopped me yet, I suppose. Anyway, this is GOOD! Good food, good company, good God... I’m blessed.



Good God, look at this feast! Turkey, mashed potatoes, the works! So much food, we’re going to be eating these leftovers for days... which sounds awesome. But seriously, do we really need this much food? It’s a little excessive. I mean, Superstore even gave us the turkey for FREE because we bought so much other stuff! Not that I’m complaining, but yeah, there’s something about that that feels wrong... Why am I so blessed?

What am I thankful for this year? Where to start? This great meal, obviously. And family, of course. My kids, my wife, extended family--some near and some far, and some not nearly far enough! Ha. But seriously, God, I’m so thankful for all the amazing people in my life. Church family, friends, the general goodness of Saskatchewan hospitality and warmth. Good people... I’m so blessed.

What am I thankful for? People, definitely people. Friends, family, so many good people. I wonder if they know how grateful I am to have them in my life? Do I say it often enough? I’d hate for something to happen and have any of them go away without knowing that I love them. Maybe that’s a little morbid for a holiday, but seriously, it happens. It’s happening to so many families that I know: old age, cancer, broken relationships. Is it okay to be thankful that none of that is happening to me and mine, for now anyways? Why am I so blessed?

What else am I thankful for? Let’s see, roof over our heads, good work that I enjoy, a good wage from that work, a little bit of money in the bank. The beautiful fall leaves, sunrises and sunsets, this wonderful country of freedom and fairness. What else...? Looks like the Riders

have finally turned things around, so that's good. Oh, and the hands that prepared the food, thank God for those hands. And travelling mercies. Can't forget the travelling mercies.

God, you have given me so much, and I am truly grateful!

What else am I thankful for? Everything, of course. There's just so much goodness in my life, far more than I deserve. Really: health, security, a generous income, education... privilege, so much privilege. I don't need to list all the places that have it worse off in the world, all the people that are threatened and held back because of natural disasters and human violence and greed. Whoops, better not think about the damage of greed and gluttony too much today, not if I'm going to enjoy this meal anyway...

Good God, I'm grateful for all that you've given me, I really am. But I also feel guilty, guilty for having more good things than I deserve, guilty that I don't have the misfortunes of others, guilty for my part in the systems that benefit me so much at the expense of others, guilty for knowing all of that and still wanting more.

I am so blessed!

Why am I so blessed?

Amen.

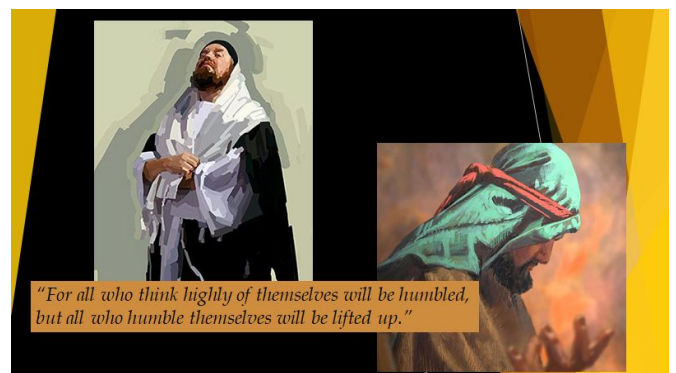
Scripture: Luke 18:9-14

Jesus also told this parable: "Two Jews went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed like this: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. My religion is flawless! I practice the Law perfectly!'

But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift his eyes, but was beating himself with guilt and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

Which of these prayers will be heard?

I tell you, this tax collector went back to his home with the mercy he came for, while the other gained nothing. **For all who think highly of themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be lifted up.**"



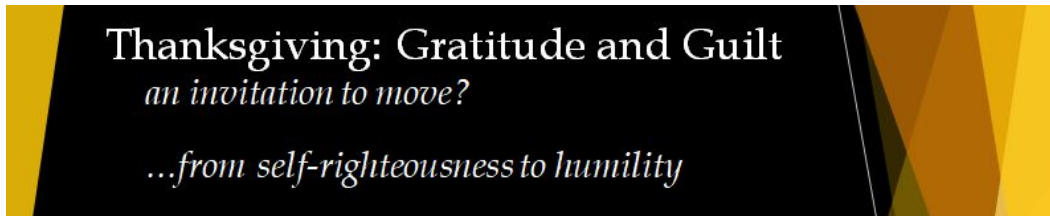
Happy Thanksgiving! How's everybody doing?

You've probably figured it out (in spite of my fine acting) that both of those characters were the same person. Those are both prayers that I will likely be thinking of at my family's Thanksgiving celebration this afternoon. (Except for the part about the Riders; the CFL still isn't very high on my list of things to be thankful for, sorry to say...)

I struggle a bit with Thanksgiving. It's a harvest celebration, a time to take stock of where you are and what you have. When I look around, I'm grateful, because I have so much. But that second thought always follows quickly after, the guilt that I have so much when so many others have so little.

I don't usually find that guilt is a helpful emotion. I tend to get stuck there, feeling badly but not able to do much about it. In this case, though, I think my guilt is trying to tell me something important, inviting me from where I am towards a better way.

I'm not saying that you need to share my feelings of guilt. But I imagine that some of you already do, and if we talk about it maybe we can learn some things together?



I have three stories to share with you today. The first one we've heard already, the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. In that story is the invitation to move from Self-Righteousness to Humility.

That prayer of the Pharisee sounds a lot like what's lurking underneath a lot of my Thanksgiving prayers: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people.'

It reminds me of the volunteer service trips I took with my church youth group in high school. Once a summer, we'd take a week-long trip to inner city Cleveland, to rural Georgia, Michigan, Puerto Rico, to help poor people with minor cleanup and construction projects. And every time, we'd come back and report to the church, and invariably half of our sharing would be something like how much the trip gave me an appreciation for how good I have it, or how amazed I was at how happy those people were in spite of their poverty.

And we meant it, we had our sheltered teenage middle-class eyes opened to a little bit of the suffering in the world, and we didn't like what we saw. So we came back grateful that we didn't share any of that pain, recognizing that we had it pretty good after all.

And that's a valuable lesson. But that's not Thanksgiving. As the parable points out, "Hey God, thank you that I'm okay and don't really need anything," that's a dead end prayer. Better the honesty of the tax collector, who recognized his need and humbly invited God to meet him there.

I think that's part of what my guilt is inviting me to, recognition that it's good to be thankful for all the goodness in my life, but there is more to the world than my material happiness and well-being. I may be comfortable, but that's not all that there is. All is not right in the world, and I have a part in that. That's humility, keeping myself in proper perspective with the rest of the world.

Thanksgiving: Gratitude and Guilt

an invitation to move?

...from self-righteousness to humility

...from condemnation to grace

A second story. One of the stories my kids listen to a lot these days is the story of the Ants and the Grasshoppers. Aesop's fable, you probably know it. The Ants work hard all summer long to save up food for when the winter comes. And the Grasshoppers, they play all summer long. Why would they store away food when there's so much food right in front of them! But of course the winter does come, and the Grasshoppers are hungry while the Ants have enough food to last the winter.

In the version of the story that my kids listen to, the Ants are pretty self-righteous about the situation. When the starving Grasshoppers come begging for food, the Ants share with them, but only grudgingly after giving them a lecture and making them promise that they'll join in the work next summer.

The moral of the story, of course, is a Mennonite favourite: work before play. Work hard and save up now, so that you won't starve when the tough times come. Or worse than starving, have to ask someone else for help. And that's a valuable lesson, it's good to work hard.

But I was thinking about that this week. In nature, what do Grasshoppers really do during the winter? I sincerely doubt that they beg food from self-righteous ants. So I did a quick Google search--anyone know how long grasshoppers live? About two months, apparently.



Ants, on the other hand, depending on the variety, live for multiple years. And the queen ants can sometimes live for decades. In fact, most of the gathering that the worker ants do isn't for themselves but ultimately goes to make sure the Queen can live.

So, who is the wiser, the Ant who slaves away, storing up food for her master, or the Grasshopper who enjoys the short lifespan that she has been given? How foolish would it be for a Grasshopper to store up food for a winter that they will never live to see?

I'm not an entomologist, by the way, so I could be wrong about the actual facts of insect lifespans. I stopped Googling after learning enough to make my point! :)

In the fable, the Ants basically criticize the Grasshoppers for not being Ants. But they're not Ants, they're Grasshoppers. And they've been handed a different script, a different set of challenges and skills in life. Their lives look different than the lives of Ants, and they're going to value different things.

As I assess my treasures at Thanksgiving, I've got a lot of that self-righteous Ant in me. "Look at what I've stored up, I worked hard, I sacrificed, and now I can enjoy the fruits of my labor." And sure, there's some room for that, hard work deserves its congratulations. (Not that I know much about hard work...)

But I also need to recognize that I'm an Ant living in a world built for Ants. And the others who don't have as much, maybe they are in fact Grasshoppers, not just lazy Ants. There are many ways of experiencing life in this world, and it would seem that wisdom is in offering grace to others instead of looking down on them or shutting them out because their path is different than mine.

One more story, perhaps I've told it here before. When I was growing up on the farm, there was an old, old farmhouse on my family's property that we rented out sometimes. Even as a kid, I could tell that it was barely livable, but we didn't charge very much and my dad went out of his way to make sure that it was as comfortable as possible.



There was one family that lived there for a while, that became something of a project for my family. They weren't destitute, but they had various health issues and the parents often struggled to find employment. They were what we'd now call "hoarders," to an extreme that made their lifestyle significantly different from ours. My mom would take them meals, and would invite their kids over to play with us while their parents were looking for work, stuff like that. After a while they moved out of our rental house, but my mom stayed in touch with them, and eventually they started coming to our church.

Now even though they didn't have very much, this family was extremely generous and worked hard to make sure this was a two-way relationship. They remembered our birthdays more faithfully than some of our own family did, and usually had some kind of small gift to offer--I probably wasn't a very gracious gift receiver, looking back.

I remember one Christmas when both of the parents had gotten new jobs and they had a little bit of money, and they brought over a full carload of Christmas gifts for our family. Again, I was a really ungrateful little brat, and I remember being really disgusted by this, poorly wrapped, bargain-bin toys and treats, nothing that any of us really wanted. Fortunately they left, rather than watching us open everything. I remember that my dad got a box of chocolate-covered cherries, which they had remembered was his Christmas favourite, but the box was opened and half of the chocolates were already missing. It was that kind of thing.

And there was a bunch of food that the mother had carefully made for us, having remembered what some of our favourite foods were... but we threw all of that away as soon as they left, because we knew the condition of their kitchen. You can imagine. They often talked about inviting us over for dinner sometime, but yeah, that was never going to happen.

I was thinking about that family this week as I was listening to a talk by [Richard Rohr on *The Sermon on the Mount*](#). He points out how central food was to Jesus and his followers, something that Rohr calls “Open Table Fellowship.” Ever notice how many of Jesus’ stories in the gospels happen around meals? He’s always going in and out of houses, sitting down for meals with people, talking about banquets, using all kinds of food-and-hospitality-based metaphors.



Rohr says that this was an intentional feature of Jesus’ ministry, and central to the life of Jesus’ followers throughout the first century. In addition to the communion ritual of the bread and the wine, there was also a regular ritual meal of the bread and fish, and that’s why we see a lot of stories about bread and fish in the gospels.

Rohr asks the question, who did Jesus eat with? The first thing that comes to mind for most of you who know the gospel stories is probably “sinners.” Now, when we think of sinners, we think of people who have committed crimes or broken taboos, those shameful sinners who have done something wrong! But in Jewish Temple culture, sinners were specifically those who had not gone to the Temple to have their sins forgiven through the proper sacrifices. And those sacrifices cost money, so sinners were basically everyone who couldn’t afford not to be. So Sinner was mostly a title of economic class. And Jesus ate with sinners.

Jesus also ate with women: although women and men usually ate separately, Jesus welcomed women at the table. And he ate with “tax collectors,” the economic opportunists who supported the oppressive Romans. And Gentiles, those Romans and other foreigners, Jesus and his people ate with them as well. And that was such a scandal that it nearly divided the early church.

But also, on the other end of the spectrum, Jesus ate with the “good Jews,” the religious leaders: The Pharisees, the scribes, the lawyers, the priests. The social, religious, and political elites. Jesus accepted their dinner invitations, too.

Jesus’ choice of dining partners would not have pleased anyone. The conservatives were upset at his lack of morals for eating with the unclean sinners, and the progressives were upset because he legitimized the elites by accepting their invitations as well. He ate with everyone, and after he was gone his followers practiced this Open Table Fellowship as well, with the merchants and artisans sharing meals with the foreigners, slaves and invalids.

Richard Rohr says that the reason Open Table Fellowship was so central to the Jesus movement was because of food is central to culture. There’s a symbolic difference between bannock and croissant; you’ll find a very different culinary experience when shopping at Sobey’s versus Giant Tiger. The kinds and qualities and quantities of food we eat carry a lot of weight in terms of social status.

Jesus challenged those norms of status and culture. Rohr says that Jesus is *“creating an alternative symbolic universe. The patterns that every culture is used to are not inevitable. We can change them. And the way that we change them is we start living in a new way.”*

Beginning with something as practical as the people that we eat with.

Would Jesus have eaten with that family from my childhood? Of course the “church answer” is yes. But that’s a really tough one. We had good reasons to keep our distance. The barriers between us were significant.

But there was an opportunity there, and we didn’t take it. (I’m not throwing shade at my parents there, I’ve had lots of similar opportunities in my adult life that I’ve passed on, too).

What we practiced with them would have been called “alms-giving” in Jesus’ culture. Charity, giving money, providing for the basic physical needs of the poor, through the institution of the Temple. But not getting involved in the intimate details of their lives, and treating people as dependents rather than equals.

Richard Rohr says that that kind of generosity is good and necessary, but that’s not what Jesus was promoting:

“Table fellowship is not the same as alms-giving...generous alms-giving may be even conscience’s last great refuge against the terror of Open Table Fellowship... Jesus isn’t pushing giving money to the poor...he’s not talking about staying in a secure, safe world and from that world going out to give Thanksgiving baskets to the poor. He’s talking about defining a new social order.”

And that new social order comes, again, not by revolution or by careful political maneuvering or by religious law-keeping, but by eating together, with all kinds of people.

Now, I'm not sure that I want a new social order... this one is very much working in my favour. But when I'm feeling guilty on Thanksgiving, that's an invitation to consider whether something different and better for everyone might just be different and better for me as well.

What does that look like? I don't know about you, but I turn down offers to eat with people who are different from me on a regular basis. We've all been invited to share a Thanksgiving dinner tomorrow evening here with the L'arche community, am I going to go to that? There are monthly "Feast and Share" potluck meals promoted in our newsletter, organized around justice with our Indigenous neighbours, and I've been to all of one of those in my six years here. If someone said, let's go volunteer to help prepare and serve a meal at the Friendship Inn or The Bridge, I'd be right there with you. But if you said, "let's go to the Friendship Inn to sit and eat with their regular clients" well... I think I'm busy that evening. And I got about six invitations in my email this summer to come to free community BBQs hosted by my Conservative MP, and I never went to eat with him, either. And there are countless informal opportunities for shared hospitality that I pass by, as well.

I'm not saying that we should all be going out to eat with strangers at every opportunity. But I wonder, if this Open Table Fellowship was so central to the Jesus movement, maybe we should be taking a deeper look at our practices around food, to move beyond generosity towards right relationships.

I keep coming back to this communion blessing from Jan Richardson:

And the Table Will Be Wide

*And the table
will be wide.
And the welcome
will be wide.
And the arms
will open wide
to gather us in.
And our hearts
will open wide
to receive.*

*And we will come
as children who trust
there is enough.
And we will come
unhindered and free.
And our aching*

*will be met
with bread.
And our sorrow
will be met
with wine.*

*And we will open our hands
to the feast
without shame.
And we will turn
toward each other
without fear.
And we will give up
our appetite
for despair.
And we will taste
and know
of delight.*

*And we will become bread
for a hungry world.
And we will become drink
for those who thirst.
And the blessed
will become the blessing.
And everywhere
will be the feast.*

[– Jan Richardson](#)

I'm grateful today for what I have been given. And I'm also hungry for this vision, more than eating or drinking for ourselves, of becoming the blessing for each other and our world.

May God meet us in our satisfaction and happiness, and also in our hungering and longing. Amen.