

Thank God for You

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
November 19, 2017—Harvest Sunday

- Psalm 95:1-7 ¹ Come, let us praise the Lord! Let us sing for joy to God, who protects us! ² Let us come before him with thanksgiving and sing joyful songs of praise.
- Philippians 1:3-11 (GNT) ³ I thank my God for you every time I think of you....
- Theme: Right now someone is thanking God for you.

Let us pray: May we remember to be thankful, Generous God, for our life unfolds in your provident care and under your attentive watch. With Jesus we pray. Amen.

The year: 1992. Lucy Borja worked for a large non-profit in Lima, Peru that assisted people dealing with HIV/AIDS. Walking to work one day she noticed two young boys – probably no older than twelve – who obviously were living on the streets: grimy, well-worn, ill-fitting clothing, hair dirty and tangled. Striking up a conversation as she walked, she quickly learned that they were scared to be living on the rugged streets of Lima.

When she reached her workplace, she told the boys that they should feel free to come there that night – they could sleep in her offices... and they should feel free to extend her invitation to other boys. Since she knew she would be attending a family birthday party that night, she told the building custodian to unlock her agency's offices for the boys if they showed up.

After the party she decided to swing by the office building to check in on the boys. Had they shown up? Had the custodian balked at letting them in? Would she find them sitting on the curb?

No, they weren't on the curb. She went into the building and headed down the hall to her suite of offices. That's where she encountered a puzzle.

The key unlocked the door [into the offices] but, try as she might, she could not shove it open.

It felt like someone had lodged a rolled-up carpet behind the door to block the entry. With the help of her sons, Lucy finally moved the door to create enough space to squeeze through [into] the [office reception area].

As she reached blindly in the dark in search of the light switch, Lucy tripped over the "carpet roll." She caught her balance and leaned her body against the wall. Holding her pose, her fingers continued to work the wall until they eventually found the light switch and flicked it upward.

Lucy initially looked down at her feet and discovered several young kids curled up on the floor, sleeping, their bodies jammed against the door. She then cast her vision around the room, though it was hard to register at first what she saw. Every nook and cranny... was covered with sleeping children [--the reception area, her office, others' offices, the hallways, the break room]. "I even found young kids snuggled tightly inside the cupboards where we stored our office supplies," Lucy said.

Lucy counted more than 600 children who slept in her [offices] that night. The word had passed like wildfire on the streets of Lima. Found: a shelter from the storm.

At that moment, Lucy did not know all the details that caused these boys and girls to run scared [--abuse, abandonment, child slavery]. But she clearly sensed that her life would never be the same. "Those children, stacked one against the other asleep on the floor... looked so defenseless and vulnerable," Lucy said in a slow, soft voice. "They had no one to be their advocate, to defend their rights," she added. "I knew then what path I had to take."

Making a personal stand against injustice usually demands making some painful choices. Lucy did not have to wait long; she quickly found herself at one of those crossroads. The kids of Lima kept coming back to the office [building] each night for sanctuary. Lucy's staff at the HIV/AIDS center could not tolerate this ongoing invasion. "It's either us or the kids," they collectively laid out an ultimatum to Lucy.

"Ok, then, it's the kids," Lucy recalled calmly answering.¹

Don't you imagine that even now – twenty-five years later – among those boys and girls who survived living on those Peruvian city streets there are many who still remember and give thanks for "Miss Lucy" – for giving them a shelter from the streets, for standing up to protect them and advocate for them and eventually to provide opportunity for them? I'm sure they do. I'm sure they thank God for her.

"I thank my God for you every time I think of you...." That's how the apostle Paul began his letter when he wrote to Christian friends in Philippi, Greece. In biblical times it wasn't unusual to begin letters with a word of thanksgiving. I love the powerful sentiment of that simple line: "I thank my God for you every time I think of you...."

The Thanksgiving holiday serves to remind us of reasons to be grateful. We can be grateful for things like housing and freedom and food; we can be thankful for people like family and friends and neighbors. But we forget that while we may be mentally assembling a list of things and people to be thankful for, right now there are people who are thankful for you! You inspired someone. You supported someone. You rescued someone. You protected someone. You befriended someone. And because of you, others are filled with joy and gratitude and appreciation.

You might know that already. You may know of some folks who feel indebted to you, who are grateful for what you've been to them, what you've done for them. You may know some of those folks. But I'm sure there are others you have no idea about.

Right out of seminary I was an associate pastor at a large church in Michigan. There much of my work was with junior high and senior high youth. While many kids flock to church youth activities, some are reluctant: social awkwardness, perhaps, or peer pressure about what is and what isn't "cool," parents reluctant to tell their children what to do, busy, busy kids... lots of reasons kids might not participate. Working with kids requires constant invitation, constant encouragement.

About fifteen years ago I received a note from a man who had been one of those reluctant youth at that church. Jim remembered how I kept encouraging him to go on mission trips, to go to church summer camp, to come to Sunday night youth groups, to play his trumpet in worship. He remembered that he did those things, but infrequently, and only after a lot of prodding. Now he's the church's Director of Music. One day while serving as an adult counselor at church summer camp, here's what Jim wrote to me,

Your encouragement and kindness are always with me.... I am happy to serve, and learn and grow my faith... Every year, every day with my faith, you are in my

¹ "Heroes turn small steps into grand leaps," by David Batstone in *SojoMail – a weekly ezine*, 7/6/2006

mind as a rock in the foundation. Please know that you are my hero, and I will be forever in your debt.

I had no idea. I had no idea I had any impact on Jim. But he's thankful for me.

People are thankful for you. They're thankful for you because...

- You ran after them when they accidentally left their cell phone on the store counter.
- You shoveled their sidewalk when you thought no one was watching.
- You called them after you'd missed them at church for the last couple of weeks.
- You spoke to them when they were a newcomer in your class or at the office or in your neighborhood or at church and you eased their anxiety.
- You inspired them by your coaching or teaching or mentoring.
- You stopped their child from doing something dangerous when they weren't there to intervene.

People thank God for you because of the impact you had on them, maybe even for reasons you might consider insignificant. But kindness, compassion, encouragement, support are never insignificant.

When Mrs. Klein told her first graders to draw a picture of something for which they were thankful, she [wondered what] little these children, who lived in a deteriorating neighborhood, actually had to be thankful for. She knew that most of the class would draw pictures of turkeys or of bountifully laden Thanksgiving tables. That was what they believed was expected of them.

What took Mrs. Klein aback was Douglas's picture. Douglas was so forlorn and likely to be found close in her shadow as they went outside for recess. Douglas's drawing was simply a hand.

...But whose hand? The class was captivated by his image. "I think it must be the hand of God that brings us food," said one student.

"A farmer," said another, "because they grow the turkeys."

"It looks more like a policeman, and they protect us."

"I think," said Lavinia, who was always so serious, "that it is supposed to be all the hands that help us, but Douglas could only draw one of them."

Mrs. Klein had almost forgotten Douglas in her pleasure at finding the class so responsive. When she had the others at work on another project, she bent over his desk and asked whose hand it was.

Douglas mumbled, "It's yours, Teacher."

Then Mrs. Klein recalled that she had taken Douglas by the hand from time to time; she often did that with the children. But that it should have meant so much to Douglas ...

Perhaps, she reflected, this was her Thanksgiving, and everybody's Thanksgiving – not the material things given [to] us, but the small ways that we give something to others.²

In his own way, by that simple drawing, little Douglas was thanking God for Mrs. Klein.

St. Paul wrote, "I thank my God for you every time I think of you..." People are thanking God for you. Who are you thanking God for?

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² <https://www.rd.com/true-stories/inspiring/thanksgiving-story/> accessed 11/15/17