

The Day Before Thanksgiving

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
November 24, 2019—Harvest Sunday

- Deuteronomy 8:1-10 (Good News Translation) ¹“Obey faithfully all the laws that I have given you today, so that you may live, increase in number, and occupy the land that the LORD promised to your ancestors. ²Remember how the LORD your God led you on this long journey through the desert these past forty years, sending hardships to test you, so that he might know what you intended to do and whether you would obey his commands. ³He made you go hungry, and then he gave you manna to eat, food that you and your ancestors had never eaten before. He did this to teach you that you must not depend on bread alone to sustain you, but on everything that the LORD says. ⁴During these forty years your clothes have not worn out, nor have your feet swollen up. ⁵Remember that the LORD your God corrects and punishes you just as parents discipline their children. ⁶So then, do as the LORD has commanded you: live according to his laws and obey him. ⁷The LORD your God is bringing you into a fertile land—a land that has rivers and springs, and underground streams gushing out into the valleys and hills; ⁸a land that produces wheat and barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and honey. ⁹There you will never go hungry or ever be in need. Its rocks have iron in them, and from its hills you can mine copper. ¹⁰You will have all you want to eat, and you will give thanks to the LORD your God for the fertile land that he has given you.
- Luke 5:17-26 (Good News Translation) ¹⁷One day when Jesus was teaching, some Pharisees and teachers of the Law were sitting there who had come from every town in Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem. The power of the Lord was present for Jesus to heal the sick. ¹⁸Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a bed, and they tried to carry him into the house and put him in front of Jesus. ¹⁹Because of the crowd, however, they could find no way to take him in. So they carried him up on the roof, made an opening in the tiles, and let him down on his bed into the middle of the group in front of Jesus. ²⁰When Jesus saw how much faith they had, he said to the man, “Your sins are forgiven, my friend.” ²¹The teachers of the Law and the Pharisees began to say to themselves, “Who is this man who speaks such blasphemy! God is the only one who can forgive sins!” ²²Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, “Why do you think such things? ²³Is it easier to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? ²⁴I will prove to you, then, that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” So he said to the paralyzed man, “I tell you, get up, pick up your bed, and go home!” ²⁵At once the man got up in front of them all, took the bed he had been lying on, and went home, praising God. ²⁶They were all completely amazed! Full of fear, they praised God, saying, “What marvelous things we have seen today!”
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Why wait to thank God for blessings we enjoy now?

Looking ahead to Friday, what will you be thankful for then?

- That the turkey turned out well? That the new stuffing recipe you decided to try lived up to the reviews you’d read about it?
- That your home’s furnace worked, the plumbing worked, the dishwasher worked?
- That making reservations for Thanksgiving dinner was a good idea—that the restaurant’s meal was delicious and saved you a lot of work?
- That your houseguests made it safely to your home? That they left?

I’m sure that you’ll be thankful for a lot of things the day *after* the big event. But what about the day *before*? Will you be thankful then? For what?

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That question about being thankful before the big event occurred to me when I was reading today’s familiar story from Luke’s gospel. It’s the story about Jesus healing a paralyzed

man who Jesus was able to see only because his friends lowered him through a hole in the roof. When I was a kid I was captivated by that story. That may have been the inspiration for my brother and I figuring out how we could climb out our bedroom window and walk around on the roof of our house. I loved the idea of the man—still on his bed or futon or mattress or cot or whatever-- being carried by his buddies through town to where Jesus was. The crowd listening to Jesus was so thick that the men couldn't get into the house where Jesus was teaching. The friends came up with the ingenious idea of going up on top of the house and lowering their buddy through the roof. That sounds crazy to us today; how did they do it?

Here's what you need to know about houses in ancient Palestine. First, roofs were flat, creating additional living space under the sun and stars. People used the roof area for meditation or worship, to dry fruit, as a meeting place offering privacy, and as sleeping quarters during the hottest months.¹ A stairway on the outside of the house would lead up the roof. Roofs were "made of wooden beams placed across stone or mudbrick walls; the beams were covered with reeds, matted layers of thorns, and several inches of clay."² The clay would bake in the sun and become strong enough to walk on, but with a little work it could be dug through, and with a little more work it could be repaired fairly easily.

That's how it was that the friends were able to take their paralyzed buddy up on the roof, then lower him into the house through a hole in the roof. Jesus was impressed by their faith—the fact that they went to that much trouble to get the man to him. Jesus pronounced the man's sins forgiven, then commanded the paralyzed man to get up off his bed and walk home. The man swung his feet to the floor, stood on his own two legs, and walked out of the house, praising God for this indescribable blessing: mobility restored.

Sure, he had good reason to thank God. For the first time in who knows how long, the man could stand and walk like anybody else. He could return to his trade. He could go to the synagogue on his own. He could stroll with his sweetheart. He could play with his kids or grandkids. He had good reason to be thankful that day.

But what about *the day before* that unforgettable day of great thanksgiving? Before he was overwhelmed by the blessing of being healed, what could the man have been thankful for then? Thankful for friends who carried him to Jesus and who were determined enough to dig through the roof? Thankful for neighbors who helped him care for his house and animals and crops? Thankful for the beauty of a clear blue sky? What might the man have been thankful for *before* the life-changing event that that propelled him into an especially thankful mood?

A minister in Vancouver, Washington gave a lot of thought to that idea of what she *could* have been thankful for. On May 25, 2016 an arsonist set fire to the church she served. She remembers that the day was filled with the chaos of fire trucks and police and trying to understand what had happened and why. Everyone was immeasurably thankful that no one was hurt, and that many months later life had returned to normal. But the days and weeks and months after the arson were consumed by the challenge of arranging temporary quarters for the church, filled with the frustration of working through the insurance claim, bogged down by the time-consuming process of working with contractors.

Yes, looking back at it all the minister was thankful for all they had, considering everything she and the congregation had been through. But she wondered, "What was I thankful for on May 24th, *the day before* the event that impacted me so strongly?"

- She wondered if she had told her kids that she loved and admired them.

¹ James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney, William White, eds., The Bible Almanac. Carmel, NY: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1980, 490.

² Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., The Anchor Bible: Gospel According to Luke (I-IX). Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1981, 582.

- She wondered if she noticed and appreciated the beauty of that spring day.
- She wondered if she was thankful that she was able to put a roof over her head, clothing on her back, food on the table.

How naturally thankful had she been? How much did she fill her life with a spirit of gratitude *before* the act of an arsonist brought her blessedness keenly into focus?³

Surely you've seen a bumper sticker or lapel button or t-shirt or wall poster with the well-worn expression, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life."⁴ This truism is intended to inspire you to see all the possibilities, opportunities, hopes that surround you now and await you in the future. What if we were to focus *now* on what we have to be thankful for?

- Not waiting until we've finished that big project that looms over us...
- Not waiting until we get things in order...
- Not waiting until we get the diploma or the promotion...
- Not waiting until we're seated around the Thanksgiving table....

Why don't we focus *now* on what we have to be thankful for *now*, today, in this moment?

Here's what I'd like you to do. Find the index card that was included in this morning's bulletin. If you don't have one, or if you already used it for something else, take any piece of paper from the pew rack in front of you. Then find a pen in the pew rack, or in the Fellowship Register. Share the pen with your neighbor if necessary.

I'm going to ask you to write down something that you're thankful for right now. But before you write anything, here's the important instruction: ushers are going to collect the cards, and I'll include some of them in the Prayers of the People this morning. So, if you don't want what you wrote to be shared aloud, simply draw an "X" across what you wrote—that will tell me not to read that card. Glen is going to provide us with a brief musical interlude. During that time, think about what you have to be thankful for *today*, right *now*:

- What's going on in your life today...
- What you have, or what you *don't* have anymore...
- What you're able to do, or what you *don't* have to do anymore...
- The people occupying your thoughts...
- The individuals or groups having a positive influence on your life or in the world.

On the card write who or what you're thankful for today, right now—it can be very simple or profound, anything at all. Be very brief—just a word or two or three. When you're done, turn it over so the blank side is up and pass it to the end of your pew. So... "What are you thankful for today, right now, even before the actual Thanksgiving Day?"

[Musical interlude]

From today's gospel lesson we learned that the man whose paralysis was healed expressed his joy and thankfulness to God. We can hope he was thankful *before* his everyday life was changed by that encounter with Jesus the Healer. Why should we wait to thank God for blessings we enjoy now? Let's be mindful of the blessings that surround us and uplift us and fill us even before we celebrate a day of Thanksgiving.

[sermons: se20191124; © 2019 Jon M. Fancher]

³ Jennifer Brownell, "Remembering to Praise." *StillSpeaking Daily Devotional* for May 24, 2019. United Church of Christ at ucc.org, accessed 5/24/2019.

⁴ The expression is attributed to Charles Dederich by *The Washington Post* (December 10, 1978), p. C5. He was the founder of Synanon, a California-based self-help community for drug abusers and alcoholics that evolved into a violent cult. <https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Today>, accessed 11/20/2019