

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

The Anatomy of Giving Thanks
Deuteronomy 13.22-27; Luke 17.11-19
Russ Dean, November 23, 2008



The Psalmist of old had never taken a Gross Anatomy course, not even Biology 101, so when he said, “*I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made*” (Psalm 139.14), though absolutely right, he really had no idea what he was saying. Consider a few fascinating, but largely useless facts that I gleaned from that source of all fascinating but largely useless knowledge, “The Internet”:

- You were born with 300 bones. When you get to be an adult, you have 206 – 29 different bones in your skull, itself.
- There are 45 miles of nerves in your skin.
- An average human scalp has 100,000 hairs (until you have children!)
- The average surface of the human intestine is 656 square feet – which is more than enough to completely cover this choir loft and rostrum area.
- Your heart will beat 3,000 million times and will pump 48 million gallons of blood through 60,000 miles of your blood vessels.
- During this hour you will lose 1 billion cells – including 15 million blood cells every second – and each of those 1 billion bits of you will be replaced. In your lifetime, you’ll shed 40 pounds of skin, which contains 45 miles of nerves, and every year 98% of the atoms in your body will be replaced.
- Though your brain is 80% water the rest of it has 100 billion nerve cells, and its impulses travel to and from you body’s 850 muscles at 170 mph. And... it is estimated that the storage capacity of the brains exceeds 4 terabytes – that is, 1024 gigabytes, or one trillion bytes of information. Or, for the old timers, enough capacity to store about 10 billion telegrams! (By the way, you can now buy a 1 terabyte hard drive for about \$150!)¹

The anatomy of the human body is truly incredible. There is simply no way to comprehend its complexity, and the interaction of various body systems multiplies this complexity geometrically. How can we explain sight recognition? Speech production? Consciousness? (That you can think that you can think!) It is no wonder many of the greatest

¹ This information came from several Google searches on the body.

scientific minds in the world turn their eyes heavenward when they investigate such mystery and also cry with the Psalmist: *O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! What are human beings, that you are mindful of [us]?* (Psalm 8)

It begins with the study of anatomy, but the human being cannot be understood by simply looking at individual body parts. We are more than the sum of those parts. So it is with the Anatomy of Giving Thanks.

It begins in the head. By recognition, which requires our sensory input: *O taste, and see that the Lord is good!* (Psalm 34.8), the Psalmist also reminds us. Have you tasted – recognized the presence of God in a simple meal? God is good. Have you seen – in a sunset... a shooting star... a flower in bloom... the painting of one of the masters, or the art of child's hand...? Have you seen the goodness of God? Open your eyes, for it springs all around us, in physical manifestations, and in the beauty of human interaction, relationships through which the grace of God is known in human touch and that more-than-human connection of hearts. God is good. The Anatomy of Giving Thanks begins in the head, by *tasting* and *seeing* God, for as the mystic, teacher and writer, Thomas Merton, has reminded us,

To be grateful is to recognize the Love of God in everything [God] has given us – and [God] has given us everything. Every breath... every moment of existence... Gratitude... takes nothing for granted... is constantly awakening to the new wonder and to praise of the goodness of God. For the grateful know that God is good, not by hearsay but by experience. And that makes all the difference.²

Gratitude begins in the head. But it cannot stay there. “A mind is a terrible thing to waste,”³ as the old commercial said, and a mind filled with the recognition of God, a worse waste, yet. For as Chief Joseph is to have said, “The longest journey you will ever make in life is from your mind to your heart.” Without the impact of your heart, without feeling gratitude, the

² This is one of those ubiquitous Merton quotes that makes the rounds... with no citation. Sorry, Thomas!

³ This was as commercial for the United Negro College Fund.

recognition of God, and the power we have to continue to incarnate God, is destined to die a death of lethargy and apathy. In a contemporary cry that has become commonplace we might say, you gotta “feel it.” Feel the love! Edward Sandford Martin said, “Thanksgiving Day comes, by statute, once a year; to the honest [person] it comes as frequently as the heart of gratitude will allow.”

It begins in the head. It must move to the heart. But a thanks giving with no hands and feet is a breathless corpse. Former President John Fitzgerald Kennedy reminded the country, “As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them.” But here is where it gets hard, sometimes. To recognize is human... To feel is human... But to respond, to truly respond, given the difficulties of life, is divine.

The late John Claypool was an eloquent spokesman of gratitude, and his testimony a poignant reminder that gratitude sometimes comes on the wings of the bittersweet. At the time his young daughter Laura Lue was diagnosed with incurable leukemia, Claypool was a well-known Baptist minister. Her untimely death understandably sent a family reeling, a mother into the depths of immeasurable grief, a father and pastor back to questions of theodicy at the foundations of faith. How can this be? God? *Taste and see that the Lord is good?* Where, in this? How?

Claypool’s testimony is the testimony of tried faith, tested faith – which is the only true faith. In the aftermath of that death, Claypool’s wife was embittered and angry. She turned against friends and family and God. And one can understand how this might happen. But John Claypool dug down to the depth of his faith, and what he found, even in the muck and mire of an abyss of heartache was... gratitude. John Claypool has told many times, and has written eloquently about his experience. He was faced with the dramatic choice: either blame God, turn

from God, and be entombed by the grief of despair and the darkness of an unforgiving life, or embrace the recognition that though little Laura Lue was taken way too early, the time he had with her, the gifts she gave in her smile and her young, exploring life, were gifts to him that only a life of gratitude could repay.

So John Claypool, who died an Episcopal Priest in Birmingham, Alabama, spent the rest of his days, putting flesh to his gratitude. Preaching and teaching and listening and counseling gratitude. “To be grateful is to recognize the Love of God in everything... Every breath we draw is a gift of divine love...”

Head... Heart... Hands and Feet.

Ten lepers came to Jesus for his touch, yet only one returned to give thanks. Jesus was disappointed, and asked “*Where are the other nine?*” Jesus’ next line is another of those lines that shocked the Jews,⁴ offended their orthodox sensibilities, and should be a reminder to us that faith will not be confined to any expected place, not even to religion. For as he so often did, Jesus found faith in a “*foreigner*.” In Samaria – that land of the hated, pagan, enemies of the Jews – Jesus found yet another exemplar of faith, and his words to this one should be instructive: *Get up and go... your faith has made you well. (Your faith... has made you... well.)*

But the other nine were healed. What of their faith? There are several ways to interpret this word. The healing of the other nine was the result of the generous, undeserved, unexpected, unconditional love of God. Even without our gratitude, God is good. But Jesus’ words to the one, cause us to ask about healing and wholeness. Maybe Jesus message to us on this Thanksgiving

⁴ I do not hesitate to use the phrase “the Jews,” but please do not mistake this as an anti-Semitic remark. As I read scripture, Jesus’ message was an anti-establishment message – and the “establishment” in his day was represented by Jewish orthodoxy. Today, in my American setting, it would be represented by American, southern, evangelical Christianity. Not all Jews were antithetical to Jesus’ message, nor are all Christians today, though in my view the comparison stands to reason. As Jesus opposed “the Jews,” so would he, today, oppose “the Christians.”

Sunday is that though the others had been made physically clean – only this one was made truly *whole*. Only this one had *faith*. And what was the key?

Gratitude. Mind. Heart. Feet and hands.

If you've been following my contrived little anatomy lesson, you should have recognized: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your... Mind... and all your Heart... and all your Strength...* (Mark 12.30) and to do so, to know God in the goodness of this world, even amid this world's inescapable heartache, to feel God enough to be moved in compassion, to express that knowledge in an act of gratitude... is to Love God with our soul.

If our faith is to make us whole, it has to be expressed. Made manifest with the strength of all we are and all we have. In gratitude. The Israelites were instructed to take a tithe of their crop, that is, a tenth of their income... and have a party! You might think this sounds great. I can hear some of you now, "I'd tithe, too, if I got to spend it all on wine!" (Which is an option according to the scripture... *Use the money for... strong drink, or whatever you desire* [Deuteronomy 14.26]) But, what if we actually decided to take a tenth of our collective incomes, and we came together here every Thanksgiving and literally threw a million dollar party? That would be one whale of a Thanksgiving meal, wouldn't it be!? But. Just imagine the backlash. "What a waste!... I can't believe you ate and drank and danced away all that money.... You could have given it to the poor..." Or (more likely), "I could have kept it in my portfolio." (And you see what good that will do you!⁵)

The lesson of tithing is the scripture's way of telling us that our gratitude needs to be lavish. All we are. All we have. In celebration of God's goodness. What do you need to give in this season in order to say just thanks? Do you need to have a party and invite the neighbors?

⁵ At this moment in our history, the stock market is falling by record amounts, nearly on a daily basis.

Even in a season of economic uncertainty maybe you need to give a little more to the church which gives so much to you? To whom do you need to return, just to say thanks?

Faith begins in our head. And it moves through our heart to hands and feet that long to be healed (and to heal)... by gratitude.

May it be so!