

## “Thankful On Purpose”

There you have it - what Mom wants for Thanksgiving.

Why is it so easy to forget to be grateful? I don't always remember to be thankful. It's not hard to do, but who doesn't sometimes need a reminder to say thank you?

My choir director at the Methodist Church where I grew up, Leola, always split the word Thanksgiving into two parts whenever she had to write it down: Thanks & giving. She said giving thanks is what the day is about, and she used to say it like that, too. Not Thanks giving, but Thanks giving...

The people in today's passage forgot to be thankful...

Who's grateful in this passage? Anyone? Does anyone sound the least bit thankful or appreciative? The crowd treats Jesus like some kind of performing animal – or like an actor who has to audition to get a part... “Do another one Jesus! What sign are you going to do for us so we believe in you?”

It reminds me of that TV show “America's Got Talent.” Remember that? Of course, I never watch that show – I might “eaveswatch” it from time to time. That's like eaves dropping on a conversation - -which I also never do! – You know, it's like listening to the TV from the kitchen while you're unloading the dishwasher, or when you're actually trying to do something productive and that show just ‘happens’ to be on.

For those of you not familiar with America's Got Talent, it's like an old fashioned talent show on steroids. The one contestant who gets voted through to final round, beating out the competition, wins a million bucks and a gig in Vegas!

But has anyone noticed that the acts seem to get bigger and crazier and more “wow factor” every week? It used to be some jugglers and teenybopper dance troupes – maybe a dog act where the dog walks on a tightrope or dances with a cat? As the show has evolved however it seems to me that the acts are getting more dangerous. The acts that are getting voted through aren't just jugglers and dancers and singers anymore...They're jugglers who swallow fire, or

guys who get shot out of cannons, or well-oiled couples who might be dancers or they might be acrobats – tossing each other into the air keeping the audience on the edge of their seats.

The three judges sit on the sidelines and if any of them get bored during anyone's performance they push the buzzer, lighting up a giant "X" further testing the concentration of the poor juggler, singer, or trained dog act who's up on stage. The judges give feedback but it's always the same isn't it? Make it bigger. Make it more dangerous. Up the ante... Wow us, or we won't vote you through to the next round.

Sound familiar? ...and this isn't Jesus first turn on the Judea's Got Talent stage either. We don't have to go back very far to find Jesus first appearance in front of the crowds – he's been doing a few healings here and there, but the crowds are relatively new -- Jesus and the disciples have just finished serving lunch to 5,000 people with only 5 loaves of bread and two fish. They had 12 baskets left over and the only one who gave thanks was Jesus himself when He blessed the meal. They declared him prophet and wanted to forcibly make Jesus their King, but they never said 'thank you.'

I guess we forget to be grateful when we're full – and when we're so excited we want to create a king out of a guy we just met....

So the crowd noticed, John tells us, that after their miraculous lunch, the disciples set out in a boat for the opposite shore – but Jesus didn't go with them – He had gone off by himself to get away from the would-be kingmakers.

Imagine their surprise when they got across the lake and Jesus was already there!

"Rabbi – when did you get here?"

And he tells them straight up: "You're focus is all wrong. You're not looking for me because of who I am – you're looking for me because of what I can give you. Don't work for food that goes bad, work for the good stuff – the food that endures for eternal life."

So they ask him "What do we have to do to perform this work?" and the answer he gives them – a straight answer – very UN-Jesus like , in fact – "Believe in Him whom He has sent." Period.

Then they completely ignored what Jesus had just said and asked him, “What signs are you going to do for us?” Really? They’re requiring the Son of God – the Messiah Himself – to prove that he really is the One.

They couldn’t have forgotten what they experienced the previous day. That’s why they were there. 5,000 people got a free lunch...? Were they so busy stuffing their greedy faces that they didn’t notice what Jesus was doing for their neighbors? I think so. It wasn’t the sign so much as the free food.

Hang on though....these aren’t bad people... let’s give them a break for second. These are simply the ordinary, regular, probably poor people, hungry, and living a country they can’t even call their own because it’s occupied by an oppressive military superpower. Is it any wonder that they forgot to say “thank you” ?

There are many reasons for this crowd to be seeking out Jesus the Messiah, but I don’t want to give them too much credit. They’re just hungry again. They got free food yesterday. And I think they’re hoping for a repeat performance. Do it again, Jesus! Do your little act again, and we won’t buzz you off the show... But Jesus turns the tables on them.

Now, I don’t watch this talent show very often – I mean, I never watch this show – but I have never seen a talent show contestant turn around and say to the judges, “What are you going to do for me? This isn’t a one-way street, you know. What are you going to bring to the table?”

He doesn’t ask much, either. They have to do a little something for Jesus. In order to receive the food that will nourish them to eternal life, they have to believe. “This is the work of God: that you believe in whom He has sent.” That’s it! Seems simple enough...

But this crowd doesn’t even want to do that. “Give us this bread always...” They don’t want to do anything for it.

There’s no happy ending to this passage. The religious leaders are about to start trying to rile up dissent in the crowd. And since they didn’t get their free lunch today it doesn’t seem very hard to do they’re hungry and they’re going to start complaining in a minute...

“Isn’t this Jesus the Son of Joseph? We know him! He’s not from Heaven – He’s from Nazareth!”

They don't believe in him and Jesus knows it, and calls them on it.

So that's all we have to do. We have to believe in Jesus. We have to vote Jesus and his talent on to the next round. We have to give him the prize – our treasures – and the gig, not in Vegas – though Vegas could certainly use a little Jesus – no. The big Las Vegas gig that we reward Jesus with is the gig in our hearts and lives. We have to stop being his judges, demanding that he do tricks for us, and invite him up onto OUR stage – into OUR lives. Make him the star. We are his supporting cast, and we don't have to juggle flaming swords or walk a tightrope or anything like that. We just have to believe.

We have to be grateful. On purpose. We have to decide to be thankful. Nobody was ever grateful just naturally. Nobody said thank you – and meant it – by accident.

Gratitude is a choice and as I mentioned last week I think, being thankful helps us to be humble. It helps us to remember that ultimately it all belongs to God.

So, Jesus got me sober once. Great trick! It was just what I needed at the time. Like the oppressed and hungry crowd, Jesus fed me what I needed at the time. How would it sound if now I started saying "What are you going to do for me now, so that I believe in you?"

As Jesus told the crowd, "Moses may have brought the Manna down but it came from heaven. God sent the manna."

Steve Goodier, the DS for the metro district of the Rocky Mtn Conference, wrote this story in his blog. The late journalist and author Dr. Fulton Oursler used to tell of an old woman who took care of him when he was a child -- a woman who not only expressed her thanks, but felt it. Anna was a former slave who, after emancipation, was hired by the family for many years. He remembered her sitting at the kitchen table, her hands folded and her eyes gazing upward as she prayed, "Much obliged, Lord, for my vittles." He asked her what vittles were and she replied that they were food and drink. When he said that she would get food and drink whether or not she gave thanks, Anna said, "Yes, we'll get our vittles, but it makes 'em taste better when we're thankful."

She told him to always look for things to be grateful for. As soon as she awoke each morning, she asked herself, "What is the first thing I can be grateful for today?" Sometimes the smell of

early-morning coffee perking in the kitchen found its way to her room. On those mornings, the aroma prompted her to say, "Much obliged, Lord, for the coffee. And much obliged, too, for the smell of it!"

Young Fulton grew up and left home. One day he received a message that Anna was dying. He returned home and found her in bed with her hands folded over her white sheets, just as he had seen them folded in prayer over her white apron at the kitchen table so many times before. He wondered what she could give thanks for at a time like this. As if reading his mind, she opened her eyes and gazed at the loving faces around her bed. Then, shutting her eyes again, she said quietly, "Much obliged, Lord, for such fine friends."

Oursler was deeply influenced by Anna's uncanny ability to always find some reason to be "much obliged." This wise woman taught him a secret that many people never learn: she taught him how to be happy. By being thankful on purpose.