

Being thankful even when it's difficult

At Sunday school this week we focused on the story of the 10 lepers Jesus healed and how only one returned to thank Jesus.

I like to think I would be the grateful person who thanks Jesus, but I suspect, deep down, that I would more likely be one of the nine who didn't return to thank him right away. I would get distracted or figure I would thank Jesus later. I would almost certainly want to rush off to see my family when I hadn't seen them in so long.

That, I think, is one of the challenges with being grateful—that it isn't always a quick "thanks" for holding the door or passing the gravy boat. Sometimes it requires more. We might need to put our plans on hold to come face to face with Jesus and thank Him. We might have to fall on our knees and acknowledge that we cannot do anything without His healing, His power, and His mercy.

It's easy to be grateful in the happy moments, when the turkey and stuffing are on the table and a fresh pumpkin pie awaits. But can we also be grateful in the darker moments, the lonelier times, the times when we are hurting or still waiting to be healed?

A truly grateful heart might be harder to develop than I want to admit.

"God knows best," Blessed Solanus Casey wrote, "and, while we'll still hope for a favorable surprise, we can hardly do better than not only being resigned to whatever God permits but even beforehand to thank Him for His mercifully loving designs."

That's the perspective of a saint, to be ready and willing to be grateful to God for whatever life brings. That's a challenge—and a big one. It seems daunting in the moments when we are hurting or uncertain or waiting for the sun to break through the clouds as it did for the people who had leprosy.

And often Thanksgiving comes at those sad times, as loss stands front and center.

Last night at the grocery store, the cashier who was ringing up my groceries didn't recognize one of the vegetables I was buying. I told her what it was, and she apologized for not knowing. Then she said, "My mother would have known. She had all these recipes, but I'm not a cook like she was."

As the conversation continued, I learned that she would be celebrating her first Thanksgiving without her mother, a woman who loved to cook and did it well.

I keep thinking of that cashier, how she's weighing sweet potatoes and ringing up can after can of cranberry sauce and lugging turkeys and hams across the scanner. She's helping prepare others' Thanksgiving dinners just by keeping them moving through the line and out of the store. And she's doing it with both sadness and a smile.

This Thanksgiving, I am grateful for the many blessings in my life—and there are so, so many. But I am also trying to be grateful for some of the challenges too, some of the burdens I would happily leave by the side of the road. Maybe they are helping me grow in some way I can't understand.

"Jesus does not ask for great achievements," St. Therese of Lisieux said, "only surrender and gratitude."

So simple and so difficult all at once.

May your Thanksgiving be full of blessings and gratitude. And would you please join me in praying for the woman I encountered in the grocery store and all those for whom this will be a difficult holiday?

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