

**“RETURNING THANKS”**  
**Deuteronomy 8:7-18; Luke 17:11-19**  
**November 23, 2008**  
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Jesus cured ten lepers that day, ten untouchables who were not allowed to be in close contact with other people, to eat in company, or even to visit their families' homes. Leprosy was a disfiguring, incurable disease translating into a lifetime sentence of poverty and separation, being stared at by virtually all you encountered in fear and disgust. Ten lepers had their lives changed that day; but only one, after the first dizzying jolt of elation, thought to return to the young rabbi who had cured him and say thank you. All this week, as I have gone about my business—through board meetings and returning e-mail, while elbowing my way through the throngs of Costco shoppers to find the biggest and best potatoes to mash for this afternoon's feast, or raking leaves—I have thought about those ten lepers. I've thought about all the times I should have remembered to say thank you and didn't; and, most interestingly, for me anyway, I have pondered the question of people who have influenced my life without ever knowing it; people who by historical accident have become important to me; people I have reason to thank if I only had the opportunity. So this morning I'd like to share three of those people with you.

The first is a man named John Winthrop, a man of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, one of our Puritan Congregational forebears, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay colony. When I was a junior in college, friends convinced me that my university experience would be incomplete without a class in colonial American history from a professor named Edmund Morgan. His lectures were legendary, I was told. Not to be missed. Unenthusiastic, but dutiful, I signed up. I didn't like history. In my experience so far, history classes had involved nothing more than memorizing an endless and mostly dull parade of names, dates, and wars. I went to the first day of class, got the syllabus, went out and bought the books, and that night sat down to begin the first week's reading assignments: a biography of John Winthrop and about 30 xeroxed pages of John Winthrop's private journal. They quite simply changed my life.

Now John Winthrop was a good man and overall a good governor. I could recount for you many admirable things he accomplished in both his public and private life. I should also tell you that he could be short-tempered, abrupt, and sometimes overly protective of his dignity. He was by no means a saint. But it was not his external life that compelled me. Like many Puritan men of his time, Winthrop kept a journal; and in his private writings, he spent considerable time struggling with what he called the “taming of the heart.” He took his religion seriously, and tried scrupulously to live out his faith day by day. I found myself fascinated by his introspection. Then, in one journal entry, he wrote of the religious discipline of life, saying—and I'm paraphrasing here—that God had set humankind in a world filled with an abundance of gifts, and it was his religious duty to appreciate those gifts fully, from the taste of the food on his lips, to the beauty and utility of the forest, to making love with his wife. The tricky part of life, mused Winthrop, was to live fully engaged in and appreciative of the world, without abusing God's gifts or making false gods of them, or losing sight of God in our pursuit of them.

It was the first time that someone had articulated the meaning of religious life in a way that totally captivated me. I couldn't believe it. But this was an old dead white guy. And a puritan, no less. I was a child of the rollicking sixties! Don't trust anyone over 30 and all that. And I had been moved by a 350

year old guy who wore buckles on his shoes and a big Pilgrim hat like in the elementary school play. I was shocked, and as the Puritans would say, strangely warmed, and I wanted more. My life changed trajectory that night, in a way that eventually led to me declaring a history major, studying religious history, becoming a minister, and choosing to do ministry in the congregational tradition. So, thank you John Winthrop for all of those gifts.

My second thank you this morning would be to a 19<sup>th</sup> century Congregationalist : Johanna Bethune, one of the founders of the Sunday School movement in the United States. I literally stumbled over the history and writings of this gifted and dedicated woman soon after I started in my first church in Duluth. When I began ministry in Duluth, women ministers were rare. They were just starting to come into parish life in appreciable numbers. Most women professional church workers were Directors of Religious Education. In those days, there was a lot of tension between these young newly ordained women and the more traditional Directors of Christian Education. And, not to my credit, I did not use my position as the first ordained woman in Duluth to improve matters. But one day I was cleaning out a store room, and literally tripped over a collection of books and articles about Johanna Bethune. As I was picking up all this material, I started reading, and then I read some more, and then some more. I learned that Sunday Schools began as a literacy movement, bringing education to women, children, and the poor as a way of helping them with their religious destiny, yes, but equally importantly to give them the benefits of reading and writing. I learned that in the United States, Sunday Schools preceded public education on the frontier, often being the only source of educational opportunity in small western towns. And I learned that the only reason Antoinette Brown—the first woman ordained in the Congregational church—the reason she could be ordained and accepted as a minister was because people in rural communities throughout America, including upstate New York where Brown was ordained, these communities who couldn't afford a church or a settled minister often had a free-standing Sunday school run by a woman, a Sunday school that also included evening prayer services led by said woman, the only formal weekly worship available.

I read the words of Johanna Bethune, felt her passion and commitment, and fell in love with the ideological roots of the Christian education movement. She inspired me to mount a full-scale exhibit on the history of the Sunday school in my church in Duluth, which taught me a lot and built significant bridges between me and the religious educators in town—all those DRE's I had been so careful to distance myself from. And that resulted in my having the contacts and resources to do my job so much better and in the process I met some extraordinarily gifted and dedicated women in ministry. So thank you, Johanna, for teaching a young minister more than a history lesson.

The third person I would thank this morning I know only as Professor Bridwell. His name starts to appear in the records of this church right after the turn of the century. The church clerk notes that Professor Bridwell—never “Mr.” always “Professor”—headed up the committee on a new constitution and by-laws for the church in 1909. Professor Bridwell joined the library committee in 1910. Other mentions follow. But my favorite entry is this, from 1911, I think. “It having come to the attention of the Trustees that our budgeting for wood has been low to the point that Professor Bridwell has been for a while now supplementing our wood supply with his own without drawing attention to his action, and as Professor Bridwell refuses to be in any way repaid for his gift, the Trustees now direct the church clerk to render a formal note of thanks to Professor Bridwell for his devoted service to Jesus Christ and this congregation.” I have to tell you, it takes a lot of reading around in the church records through dry accounts of meetings

held and actions taken before you stumble over a gem like this. But I would like to join our predecessors in this church in thanking Professor Bridwell for his actions, because ever since I read that brief account three weeks ago, I have been thinking about, consciously noticing how much of the work of the church gets done in the way this man gave to the church. He saw a need and quietly, without drawing notice to it, just came in and solved the problem. Such gifts of time and effort and know-how happen all the time around here. Whether it's cleaning out cupboards or fixing what is broken, writing new dishwasher instructions or raking leaves, watching children, lending a hand in the kitchen, putting things up, taking them down, or a hundred other tasks—even though it may not be your particular assigned job—you all see it, and you do it, and you do it well. The church is served quietly, faithfully, with little fanfare or fuss. I thank Prof. Bridwell for reminding me that the best part of ministry is that it is a gift and a responsibility shared among all of us. I thank Professor Bridwell for making clear on this Thanksgiving Sunday when we celebrate all of our abundance, that time and talent as well as treasure are to be celebrated here this morning. I thank Prof. Bridwell for reminding me of how many more thank you's are owed in this place than are ever said by me or the Church Council or the Trustees or any other "official" group.

Jesus healed ten lepers on the road to Jerusalem, and only one, a Samaritan, returned to thank him. Who are the people to whom you owe a debt of gratitude? Do they know it? Maybe this Thanksgiving you should say "thank you" before it is too late. Thanks be to God. Amen.