

Give Thanks with a Culturally Conflicted Heart

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Luke 17:11-19

[Title slide] Every so often, we encounter situations in life where culture matters. One of the most culturally enlightening times in my life was when I attended Thanksgiving dinner with my then-fiancée Donna's family and found that, in addition to the turkey and stuffing and mashed potatoes and gravy and yams and pumpkin pie, they also served chow mien and sticky rice and fried won ton. You know, just like the pilgrims did.

But we live in world where culture matters. And it matters with we how we perceive Jesus. That's what happened in today's text. But before we begin exploring the topic of how culture matters with how we perceive Jesus, I wonder if we could start with a word of prayer.

Dear God, you have made us and we are yours. And in the midst of our all our different cultural upbringings, may they be your words and your thoughts and your message that is heard by these your people, in spite of this sinner who stands before them. In your son's name we pray, Amen.

10 lepers are healed but only one comes back to thank Jesus. And Jesus points out that this one was culturally different from the other nine. Something about this one's culture made him respond differently to Jesus.

The fact is that the idea of a culture only makes sense, when one culture is contrasted to another culture. When you talk about a culture, it only makes sense if there is at least one other to contrast it with. It would make little sense, for example, for me to say, that in my culture, we breathe air. Every culture breathes air. The idea of culture only makes sense if there is an example to the contrary.

But what happens when two dissimilar cultures are both you? What happens when you are pulled by the influences of two different cultures? I'd like to suggest to you that everyone in this room is influenced by at least two different, sometimes opposing cultures.

First, the very fact that you are in this room implies that you are influenced to one degree or another by the American culture. Some here today identify very strongly with the American culture. Others not so much. But everyone in this room is influenced to one degree or another by an American culture. For you to be here this morning and not be influenced by an American culture, you would have had to have lived in a remote part of the world all your life, be knocked unconscious and kidnapped in this country and brought here to this church and resuscitated in that pew as this sermon was going on. In which case, you would have no idea what I am saying . . . which I really hope makes you different from everyone else in this room, but I really can't be sure about that.

What I'm trying to say is that we all have a part of us that is American. And we, as Americans, are a people of accomplishments, achievements, results and entitlement, we are a people of manifest destiny, where even the common person is endowed with inalienable rights. We are a people of self-esteem, self-image and self-confidence. Where we stand together to claim what is ours.

Tomorrow, Labor Day, is an American holiday that honors the American Labor Movement where we the people stood up and claimed what was ours.

We teach our children to be true to themselves and follow their dreams. We enroll them in the best schools, put them on the best teams and give them trophies for participating . . . all because we can. We are simply exercising our rights and claiming what we are entitled to.

Thanksgiving is an American holiday. But because we are an entitled people, America took the spirit of Thanksgiving and turned it into Black Friday where we shop at ungodly times of the morning in order to claim what we believe we deserve – Nordstrom-type merchandise for Kmart-type prices.

Now, Thanksgiving is a ways away but we've just gone through something similar to Black Friday in Back to School sales. I went to one office supply store and turned in 10 used ink cartridges for recycling and received \$20 store credit. So I noticed this deal [picture 1] that if I used that store credit to buy two reams of paper, they would return to me all but two cents of that store credit. So, I did. Then I saw another deal [picture 2] for another two reams of paper that would return to me all but two cents of store credit. So, I did. So, for 4 cents of store credit, I got four reams of paper. Then I noticed a similar deal [picture 3] on a three ream case of paper, and batteries [picture 4], and shipping labels, and some great deals on folders for a penny, erasers for a dime, and notebooks for a quarter. I got all this stuff [pictures 5] and I'm still spending the store credit that I received from turning in 10 used ink cartridges!

America! What a country! But, you know, not once, in all my trips to the office supply store, did I ever stop the store manager and say, "Thank you so much for your generosity! You are so kind and I am very much indebted to you." No. I'm an American! I played by the rules, worked within the system and claimed what I had coming to me. [blank slide]

We, as Americans in this land of plenty, have been given a lot. How would we, as healed lepers, think about Jesus our healer? Unfortunately, it is not within our cultural background to throw ourselves at Jesus' feet and thank him. More likely, we would say: Finally. It's about time. What took him so long? Call my attorney! There's got to be something I claim for all that unnecessary hardship, pain and suffering.

We look at the good gifts that God has given to us and we say, no big deal. I had it coming to me. I'm worth it. I'm just claiming what I'm due. And the danger is that our lives reflect little appreciation for what God has done for us.

So, the very fact that you are here implies that you are influenced by this American culture. But the very fact that America is such a young country of immigrants implies that each of us has at least one other culture that influences us, and that is our culture of origin. For me, it's Chinese. For you it might be German or Swedish or Argentinian or Costa Rican or Indonesian or Australian or Korean or Singaporean or Filipino or others or a mix . . . But because America is such a melting pot, there is at least one other culture that influences you. No one lays claim to be only American. Even if your ancestors came here on the Mayflower or were Native Americans, there is a distinct culture that influences who you are, what you believe and how you act.

What does this culture (or set of cultures) tell you to do when, as healed lepers, we think about Jesus our healer? Well, I can share a bit about my thoughts as a Chinese. Your answer for your culture might be different.

For me, as a Chinese American, I am influenced by the Chinese culture. We are a people of honor and respect. We go through great length to save face, to not be indebted, to venerate our ancestors and to chase after this idea of good luck. And we work hard to follow the rules and customs necessary to fulfill our standing in society. And, while I have lost quite a bit of this Chinese culture since my grandparents immigrated, I am still Chinese and I still find its influences in my life from time to time.

So, while the American side of me sees something offered to me and claims it, the Chinese side of me will often refuse so as not to be indebted. The American side of me thinks "I deserve it so I will claim it" and saying thank you (if done at all) is a small price to pay. At times, it is even a recognition that I have received what I deserve. But, the Chinese side of me thinks "I will pay it back" because saying thank you is an admission of debt and that price is too high to pay.

Need convincing? Here is an example from the customs of the Chou dynasty. It's from sort of like an Emily Post/Miss Manners Book of Etiquette from that time. When one person wishes to meet with a second, he is to show up at the house of the second with a gift of a pheasant in his hands. He holds the pheasant out to the host with the head in the left hand (that's important for some reason) and bows twice. The host should refuse the visit claiming that the visitor is insulting himself by paying a visit to his house and the visitor should return home and the host will visit his house instead.

The visitor claims that he is not worthy of such a thing nor is he worthy of even visiting the house of the host except that someone superior to them commanded them to meet. The host should refuse again and insist that they meet at the house of the visitor. The visitor should insist a third time.

The host should then submit because the visitor is of such a high rank and is so insistent but refuse the gift of the pheasant. But the visitor should claim that he couldn't possibly visit a person of such position unless the gift was accepted. The host should refuse. The visitor should insist and finally, eventually the visitor enters the house with the pheasant.

We in America would have no time for this. In the time that it took the visitor to enter into the house, we would have taken the selfies, posted it to our Instagram accounts, liked each other's posts and started chilling in the living room with our choice of designer beverages in hand.

But we're not done yet. The kicker is when the original host goes to pay the return visit. What do you think he has in his hand? A pheasant! But not just any pheasant. It's the same pheasant! "Please forgive me but I have thought it over and I am not worthy to accept this gift . . . Are you kidding me!!! That ship has sailed people. It's time to move on.

But, the temptation for the self-esteem filled American in me is to look at the cross and think "Jesus did this for me because I'm worth it". Compared to me, it was a small price to pay. He did it because he loves me. I am simply claiming what I am entitled to. Little changes in my life. I cheapen the gift because I ignore what it cost.

And the temptation for the Chinese in me is to look to the cross and think “I will pay it back.” I will work hard. I will follow these rules. I will make the sacrifices. I will not be indebted. And I don’t enjoy the gift because I am trying to pay it back.

The gift that Jesus gave us on the cross is a costly gift that no one deserves and no one can repay.

The flaws in one culture is only recognized when exposed by another culture. My American and my Chinese cultures have much to learn from each other. I would imagine that your American and your culture or cultures of origin have much to learn from each other. And I would also submit to you that Jesus can use all the cultures represented in this room to bring us closer to the people he wants us to be.

Many years ago, I went to a baseball game. I took the day off from work and took BART to an A’s game at the Oakland Coliseum. Back in those days, the A’s were good and were heading to the World Series. I told you it was many years ago.

I arrived at the ticket gate to buy a ticket and this guy comes up to me and asks, “so you going to the game?” I said, “Yeah”. He asks, “one ticket”? I said, “yeah”. He put a ticket in my hand and says, “enjoy the game” and leaves.

I was stunned. At first the American side of me thought, “This ticket is not good enough for me! This ticket must be for bad seats or to a different game. Something I wouldn’t be interested in.” But, I looked and the tickets were really good seats for today’s game.

The Chinese side of me kicked in and wanted to pay the guy back for the ticket, but by that time the guy was already halfway up the stairs and into the stadium.

So, I had a choice. I could decide I deserved a better seat and not use the ticket. Or, I could throw the ticket away and pay my way into the game on my own. Or I could use the ticket. One that I didn’t deserve and couldn’t repay. I chose to use the ticket. And the game was awesome. Blue skies in the 70’s. Mark McGwire hit another homer. The good guys won.

In the game of life, Jesus comes to you and he puts in your hand a ticket that will get you into heaven. This is a costly gift that you otherwise are not entitled to and that you could never repay. You have a choice. You can decide to throw the ticket away because this isn’t the game you want to go to or you want to get in a different way and you deserve better. But there is no other name under heaven given among all of humankind whereby we must be saved. Or you can try to get into heaven on your own by working hard, following the rules and refusing to be indebted. And you will fail. For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and the wages of sin is death. Or you can use the ticket for the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

My friends, I urge you to take the ticket. Use the ticket. And enjoy the game.