



Thanksgiving Day, 2017
November 23, 2017
Church of the Holy Angels

1. Last night while looking for inspiration to write this homily, I went to the movies
 - and saw a remarkable film called, “Wonder”
 - based on the NY Times bestseller, Wonder tells the inspiring and heartwarming story of Auggie Pullman
 - he’s a fifth grader who is going to a regular school for the first time
 - homeschooled before that because he was born with a rare facial deformity and underwent dozens of surgeries
 - after his mom’s protective care, and his family’s undying love for him, he now must encounter the world with its cruel judgments, mockery and prejudices
 - it’s not easy – he’s called a freak, a weird act of nature
 - the crowd of kids parts like the Red Sea; faces turn; conversations stop, the snickering begins
 - but as others struggle to find their compassion and acceptance, Auggie changes them and helps them discover something about themselves
 - as his sister tells him, “you can’t blend in when you were born to stand out.”
 - the film reminds us that human beings carry with us, not just the capacity to be kind, but the very choice of kindness.”
 - what Auggie does, is help others to see beyond the surface, to look deeply and to choose kindness
 - the fact that he wasn’t the same as other kids, helped them to learn an important and valuable lesson in how to see things differently
 - deep down we grow in kindness when our kindness is tested
 - everything depends on our ability to reframe our situation more positively, our ability to experience gratitude, and our choice to be kind and generous

2. Thanksgiving is a unique holiday in that it is both civic and religious in its origin
 - it started as a harvest feast attended by both settlers and Native Americans in thanksgiving for the Plymouth colony’s first harvest
 - those who settled here were grateful – not just for food – but for being alive
 - within the first year of their arrival, half of the New England colonists were dead
 - and ¾ of the Virginia colonists had perished either from starvation or disease
 - Thanksgiving is a celebration tracing back to our immigrant forebears who, at great sacrifice, laid the foundation of a new nation and were grateful to have survived

3. The gift of thanks is not always easy
 - today's Gospel reminds us that the majority may not discover this life-changing, and essential gift
 - after all, 9 lepers, left the scene of their healing and never acknowledged it
 - you wonder, "did their minds turn immediately to other needs, newer preoccupations, more urgent petitions?"
 - did they just move on with their lives, cured from leprosy, but worried about something else?
 - did they remember what it was like to be different, set apart, feared by others who thought they might be contaminated
 - worries, anxiety, fear, negativity, prejudice, discrimination – all these things rob us of gratitude and are just as real today, as they were for the 9 lepers cured who didn't realize what they had received

4. There are times in our lives when we seem to go through life the way some children go through birthday presents
 - we tear through the wrapping paper of our gifts, piling up the boxes as we move on to the next toy
 - the same thing can happen with our desires . . . If only I were married . . . If only I had a better job . . . If only I had more money
 - problem is we forget the gifts we already have as we brood over what we don't have
 - but this thinking robs us of so much
 - this kind of thinking blinds us from the realization of what we already have
 - grateful for this moment, this act of kindness, this expression of love, this beautiful day, this joyful cry of a child, this inspiring song

5. 15 years ago today, I celebrated my first holiday Mass at Holy Angels – on Thanksgiving Day
 - and now, as I prepare for a new ministry in my life, this day, and every Thanksgiving, will have special meaning for me
 - my gratitude for you, and for this place, and for the wonderful experiences I've shared with you isn't limited to one day, it remains for a lifetime
 - what we have experienced, together, doesn't disappear when I leave Holy Angels
 - it is something that remains with us always
 - as the book of Sirach today reminds us; "God has done wondrous things"
 - "may he grant you joy of heart and may peace abide among you"
 - I think it appropriate that both my coming here and my leaving here were commemorated around Thanksgiving
 - for it is no coincidence that we are blessed, and maybe God wanted us to realize that all the more around Thanksgiving because it's a day for nothing else but thanks . . . thanks for family, thanks for blessings, thanks, like our forebears knew, for life itself

6. The healed leper, Naaman, proclaimed to Elisha, “Now I know there is no God in all the earth, except in Israel.”
 - how God must have been delighted!

7. And Christ, having healed ten, saw something greater in the one Samaritan who made time to come back, fall at his feet, and praise God
 - he saw the splendor of a human heart that believes it is loved, that accepts the gift
 - such faith not only brings salvation
 - it is the gift back to God so enchanting that God would die for love of it
 - may our prayer today echo the words of St. Paul – I give thanks to my God always