

A few years ago, I saw an amusing article in the *Star Ledger* entitled, “Why Thanksgiving is a turkey for tunes.” Being a former music teacher, who always looked for songs of the season for my students to sing, it caught my eye immediately. In the article, writer Carrie Stetler lamented that it may be the holiday of Thanksgiving itself that doesn’t seem to inspire any memorable songs. After all, Ms. Stetler wrote, “With Christmas you have the legends of Santa Claus and the reindeer....Christmas has inspired a slew of carols and popular classics, like ‘Silver Bells.’ Easter gave us ‘Peter Cottontail.’ On the Fourth of July, we sing ‘Yankee Doodle Dandy.’ And it wouldn’t be Halloween without ‘The Monster Mash.’ But no Thanksgiving song has ever caught on with the public....Maybe that’s because there are dead turkeys. There is eating. There is grandma. And, oh yeah,” she finished as an afterthought, “there is thankfulness.”

I’m not sure if Ms. Stetler is saying that people are just not thankful or even if people don’t care to think about blessings. Whatever...being thankful is just not much to sing about.

Let me tell you about someone who would disagree with that opinion.

About 30 years ago, a man named Orel Hershiser was a pitcher for the Los Angeles Dodgers. That year, the Dodgers won the World Series. Because of his outstanding pitching, Orel was named MVP—Most Valuable Player. During the last game of the series, just before the 9th inning, a TV camera caught Orel in the dugout standing all by himself leaning against the wall with his lips moving.

A few days after the World Series, Orel was invited to be a guest on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson. One of the first things Johnny asked Orel was what he had been saying while he was leaning against the wall during that big game.

“I wasn’t saying anything,” Orel responded.

“Well, your lips were moving,” said Johnny. “Come on, tell us what you were doing.”

Finally Orel said sheepishly, “I was singing.”

Of course, Johnny Carson jumped right on that! Johnny said, “You were singing? I didn’t know you were a singer. Come on, let’s hear what you were singing!”

Orel protested. “Nah, I really don’t want to.”

Just as hosts of all the talk shows like to do, Johnny had the audience clap and cheer to encourage Orel to sing for them.

Finally Orel Hershiser, MVP of the World Series game, started to sing: “Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise Him all creatures here below. Praise him above ye, heavenly host. Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost!”

Johnny Carson was speechless. The whole audience was dead silent. Then one person stood up and started clapping. And soon, the whole audience was on their feet giving Orel Hershiser a standing ovation.

What a moment! What a testimony!

This was Orel’s way of saying, “Thank you, Lord, for the blessings in my life.” He didn’t want to forget about them, even in the middle of a World Series game, not even on a popular TV show.

You might be tempted to say, “Well, sure. Orel had a lot to be thankful for. He was a big league baseball player—probably making tons of money. He should have been singing!”

The truth is, we may not be famous baseball players. We may not be earning lots of money. We may not be asked to be a guest on TV shows. Instead, we may have some major challenges and difficulties going on in our lives. But we still have much to be thankful for.

I'm not just thinking about the "usual" blessings—things we take for granted, like food, homes, jobs, friends and family—all of which are tremendous blessings. In fact, if you were to volunteer at the Rescue Mission or Salvation Army, blessings like a home and job are things they're hoping for—since at the present time many are homeless and rely on churches, synagogues, and other organizations for much-needed temporary help. But I am not talking about the basics here—like home and food and family. I'm thinking about the things mentioned in Psalm 103—all of the grace, mercy, forgiveness and steadfast love that is ours as a child of God.

Next Sunday we begin the season of Advent, preparing us once again for the coming of the baby Jesus. Can there be a better gift? Can there be more to be thankful for than God taking on human flesh and bones to be with us—to be one of us?

It certainly wasn't something God needed to do. He wasn't trying out the human experience just to see what it was like. Jesus came with a purpose in mind. He put a face on God. He showed us once and for all who God was—proving that God really wants to be in relationship with us. Even Christ's dying—and then rising again—was not too much for God in order that there would be no separation from us—ever.

In Christ Jesus, God has given each one of us a new name, a new heart, a new life, a new mind, and a new purpose. Those are not things we were owed. They are not things we deserved. They're not even things we earned. We are given them out of pure love.

Jesus showed us love and mercy and forgiveness from God and then gave us an example to follow in offering love and mercy and forgiveness to others.

I'm finding that one of the most disturbing parts of being middle aged is the fact that many of us have a very short memory span! Someone just said to me recently that her mind was just like a sponge—things keep dripping out!

How many things have we forgotten? How many names have we not been able to recall when the person is standing right in front of us? How many appointments have we missed or opportunities we allowed to slip by simply because we forgot about them? Entire industries are built on the manufacture and sale of such things as iPhone apps, daily planners, pocket calendars—all things to jog our memories because we can't seem to remember what we are supposed to be doing, where we are supposed to be going, or what is happening.

Things drip out!

And the memory of our blessings from God can also slip away.

This is not some new phenomenon for our time. People have not changed over the millennia. All the way back in the Old Testament, the prophet Hosea said these words from God: "According to their pasture, so were they filled; they were filled, and their heart was exalted; and they have forgotten me." (Hosea 13:6)

The Psalmist also knew this was a problem. He reminded himself—and us—to "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and FORGET NOT all God's benefits."

But we do forget.

I'm not sure if Thanksgiving Day itself is a bane or a blessing. Is it good to have a day, once a year, which calls our attention to our blessings and reminds us to give thanks? Or is it worse to think that if we give thanks on one day, we're finished for the whole year?

I don't believe giving thanks is about a day or a meal or a tradition or even a special prayer. It's an attitude—an attitude that needs to permeate our whole lives.

There's an old legend—an old story—about a man who found the barn where the devil kept the evil seeds he planted in human hearts. The man asked the devil why there were more seeds of discouragement than any other kind. The devil bragged that the seeds of discouragement could be made to grow almost anywhere—in almost any heart. But Satan had to admit that there was one place in which he could never get the seeds of discouragement to thrive. “And where is that?” asked the man. Satan replied sadly, “In the heart of a grateful person.”

You know, it is difficult to be discouraged when you are grateful. It is difficult to be unhappy when you have a grateful heart. It's even difficult to be angry when you have a grateful heart.

But how can we be grateful in a pain-filled world? How can we be thankful in the middle of difficulties?

Well, gratitude is an attitude we choose to adopt.

It's not just about saying thanks for all the mundane things in life—although that's not a bad way to start! It is knowing in your heart that **God is**. That God is always here with us—that God will never leave us alone—that we don't need to be afraid of whatever is up ahead because God has promised to stay with us. Thankfulness comes from remembering that when we fail, when we miss our opportunities, we know that we are the children of a God who is loving and forgiving. Thankfulness comes from remembering that with God we are given a second chance (or third or fourth!).

During the next month, we look forward to the coming again of our extra chances. With Jesus our hope is reborn. We remember again that we can start fresh with a new slate. We are not washed up, the book is not closed, the last word has not been spoken or written. We have cause to live and give thanks.

“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all God's benefits.” Amen.

Please keep the following people in your thoughts and prayers

Prayer List: Virginia, Jim, George, Betty, Beverly, Peggy, Dottie, Jack, Paul, Fred, Barbara, Doug, Larry, Charley, Kay, Michele, Marlise, Beth, Patricia, Allen, Wendy, Staci, Garo and Bobbi.