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Prez Release

Gratefulness is a Choice **December 2005**

Just about a year ago I was in England during their recognition of the Day of Remembrance held on November 11. I was waiting for a plane at Gatwick airport when a loud speaker came on and asked for all to be silent in honor of Britain's fallen soldiers. Amazingly, the place turned immediately silent. I was shocked at the reverence in so public a place. That experience last year has stuck with me and colors the way I choose to be grateful for my blessings.

I have lived in the Springfield, Missouri for just about seven years. This region of the U.S. has incredible beauty, but it also has a shadow-side. For example, Missouri has more methamphetamine related arrests than any other state. The county I live in (Greene) reports more domestic violence cases than any other county in the state, though we consider ourselves the "buckle of the Bible-Belt." Both the dark side and the beauty of our region are clear for anyone who will honestly assess this place we call home. Such conflicting realities remind me that the older I get, the more I must choose to be grateful.

The discipline of choosing to be grateful is seen in Luke's Gospel (17:11-19) that tells the story of Jesus' interaction with ten lepers. Only one of the ten returned to say a simple thank you to Jesus for rearranging his life so dramatically. Interestingly, the one who returned was a "foreigner" whose attitude seemed to be more grateful than the locals who had received the same gift of healing. That little caveat reminds us that life is uneven, not always fair and it may be those who get the raw end of the deal, who see most clearly what it means to catch a break in life and thrive because of it.

There are those in the world who, it would seem, are certainly justified in refraining from outward thanksgiving. They not only live on the hillsides of earthquake ravaged Pakistan, but right here in Springfield...like the children who wonder when mom or dad will wake up from their latest 3 day journey fueled by a methamphetamine accelerant or the single moms who die too soon at the hands of cowards whose culture has taught them "to keep their women in line." Yet, surprisingly from that very climate comes the

testimony of many who have faithfully stayed together helping each other and, despite living in violent conditions, have sacrificed what they have, so that others may survive. The Gospel account I referred to concludes with Jesus acknowledging that the gratefulness of the one leper, who said thank you, was actually central to the possibility of a new life that need not be controlled by the past. So powerful is a choice of gratefulness that a meaningful life can be defined by it. I'm grateful that the power of the Gospel neutralizes the past, redeems the present and empowers hope for the future.

Despite the conflicting pictures we face in the Ozarks, I chose to be grateful this season. I'm banking on the reality that Jesus' posture toward a grateful spirit remains the same. If that is true, the dark shadows that fall on my state and county may actually be possible to eliminate. And if that occurred, our homes and schools would, more often, be places where children could grow without fear, civil society would thrive and personal safety could be assured. It would be a place where the buckle of the Bible Belt would not be mentioned in the same sentence with horrific domestic violence and the monster called methamphetamine. I look forward to that Thanksgiving Day!

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