

Our next reading comes from the New Testament book of Hebrews. I find Hebrews to be a difficult book in the Bible to read. The author of this book is unknown, but some scholars think that the author is unknown because the author is a woman. We don't know.

The book of Hebrews is a sermon that appears to be written to Jewish Christians who were facing persecution. The intended audience may have been wavering in their Christian faith and contemplating if they should return to being Jews and no longer Christians.

This is a sermon written to them to connect Jesus to an Old Testament priest and confirm that Jesus is the Messiah that the Old Testament prophets pointed to.

The text we are about to read will lift up Jesus as both the priest and the sacrifice. That doesn't really make a lot of sense and is one of the reasons why this is a difficult book of the Bible to read. This text we will be reading will use the image of Jesus as an open door to God.

Imagine a scene in which we have arrived in the parking lot to attend worship and we approach the sanctuary but when we try to open the door it is locked. The author of Hebrews describes Jesus as the open door to the place where God can be found.

### **Read Hebrews 10:11-25**

This past Thursday you may have gathered together with family or friends to celebrate the holiday of Thanksgiving. Many folks are traveling home today after spending the last few days with family in other communities. Thanksgiving is set aside as a time to connect to family and express appreciation and thanksgiving.

Blogger Conner Gwin, however, says that we are not required to be thankful. He tells about teaching a class on gratitude and he realized that he was mandating to the students that they had to be grateful. And as he reflected on this, he realized that telling people to be thankful is not good for anyone.

He says that it is wrong for us to tell people to be grateful because they may not feel it at this time of the year. If you are spending your first Thanksgiving away from family, you may not feel very thankful.

If this is the first holiday after the death of a loved one you may not feel very thankful. If getting together with family means getting into the same argument about politics or some other divisive issue, then you may not feel very thankful.

Gwin says that Thanksgiving can be forced and shallow. Thanksgiving weekend can make us feel guilty that we are not thankful enough. In other words, we don't have to be thankful at the end of November each year just because it shows up on our calendar and we are told to be thankful.

But I do want to share one story of someone who chose to be thankful for a person that made an incredible difference in their life.

Shaheen Pasha tells the following story in her own words. She says this:

“Exhausted, my mother sat on the stoop of one of the many four-story brick buildings that dotted our old neighborhood in Brooklyn, NY. It was cold, but she was too tired to care. She had dropped my siblings and me off at school and, in the few hours that remained before our return, she had to weigh her options carefully.

Her present circumstances were bleak. She was jobless, penniless, and had three children. Mom was homeless after being turned away by all of her community acquaintances who didn't have the room, money, or patience to put up with the charity case that our family had become.

It was there on that stoop in 1984 that the elderly white lady with the raspy voice, who owned an apartment building a few doors down, found her. She had been alerted to my mother's presence by a friendly neighbor who remembered my mother from better days.

In the hours before school let out, the stranger offered her spare bedroom, rent-free, to a homeless Pakistani woman and her three children. That offer was a turning point in our lives, saving us from homeless shelters and destitution. And it created a folklore-like legend in our family about the kindly woman who opened her home to us.

But as decades passed, her name disappeared from our collective memories. We knew her simply as "the Landlady."

At first, she was simply the main character of a story we told each other during tough periods to remind ourselves about the goodness of humanity. A fable of hope. Over time, however, as mounting rhetoric about immigrants began to sweep the country, the Landlady became a larger symbol for me of what it really means to be American at a time when my children were beginning to question their place in an increasingly polarized nation.

But the Landlady's legend was no longer satisfying to me. Even as I comforted my children, I was at war with myself, suddenly questioning the motivations of a woman who my family had long considered a fairy godmother. For years, I tried to take the Landlady's generosity at face value.

But in a world that was becoming increasingly split into silos based on religion, race and ethnicity, I felt a pull to try to understand why the Landlady, as a white woman, would see something worth saving in a family of brown immigrants from a world apart.

What was the Landlady's name?" I asked my mother, as we sat on my couch, watching my children play. "I don't remember," she said. "It was a long time ago." "Do you remember anything at all about her?" I persisted. "She was a good woman. I think her name was Dorothy. When we needed help, God sent her."

That was all I had to go on as I began my search for the Landlady. That and the address of the apartment building we had lived in 33 years earlier, my mother's vague recollection that she may have died in late 1985, and a child's memory of beer and cigarettes and a half-lit apartment. It was a search that took me from my home in a small college town in Massachusetts through the rabbit hole of the Internet and finally landed me in a rural Pennsylvania mining town.

Through rigorous internet searches I was able to find out that the Landlady died in 1985. The Landlady's name was Dorothy Vollkommer. Knowing her name changed everything. She was no longer just the Landlady. She was a woman, born Dorothy Andrea in 1921 to German immigrant parents. The child of immigrants, just like me.

While I grew up poor in Brooklyn, Dorothy's childhood was spent in Portage, Pennsylvania – a small, struggling mining town. She had married a Merchant Marine named Walter Vollkommer, and she had lost a little boy named Frederick, who passed away in 1939 from prematurity and a collapsed lung.

As I entered the heart of the town, quickly noting the boarded-up storefronts dotting the main street, I felt out of place, secretly worried about my reception in this conservative area of coal country. I was a New York-bred liberal Muslim from a family of brown immigrants. What connection could I possibly find in rural Portage?

And then I met Veronica, a beautiful woman in her early sixties wearing a blue floral dress that matched her eyes. She greeted me at the door to the remodeled Victorian inn I had booked and if I had any doubts of my reception, they were gone as Dorothy's niece smiled at me and we hugged like long lost family members.

"We are a town made up of immigrants," said Irene Huschak, president of the Portage Area Historical Society. "When you talk about Dorothy and what she did for you, this was the culture of the town. Strangers helping strangers, people taking others in, whether they had a boarding house or taking in family in bad times."

Over coffee, Huschak and the other board members painted a picture of a town built on the backs of scrappy immigrants, many of whom had fled poverty and strife in Europe, seeking riches across the ocean. Portage residents had suffered their own religious persecution in the early and mid-20th century, as the Ku Klux Klan marched through the town, burning crosses, targeting Catholics and Jews in the hopes of advancing Protestant supremacy in the area.

“People would see the glow of the fires when the Klansmen marched through the town, and they would hide out of fear,” Huschak explained, adding that neighbors would step up to conceal those being targeted.

As I explored the small town, I was forced to confront my own deep-seated biases. But I realized that many of the Portage residents’ experiences mirrored my own, even if their faces looked nothing like mine.

In an odd twist of fate, I felt connected to these strangers from a small coal-mining town, whom I would never have gotten to know had it not been for the legendary Landlady. At a time when I was drowning in the divisions plaguing the country, wallowing in my own anger and prejudices, I felt like Dorothy was guiding me to a new sense of peace.

As the summer afternoon waned into early evening, I stopped at Dorothy’s gravesite to pay my respects. Thirty-three years earlier, a stranger had changed our lives. In that moment, kneeling on the grass before her headstone, I realized Dorothy had once again changed my life.

I found myself truly thankful for what Dorothy had done. In searching for her, I found a renewed sense of belonging.”

The story we just heard is a powerful story of thanksgiving. We don’t have to be thankful at this time of year because we are told to be. We do not need to be forced into a sentimental and shallow understanding of thankfulness.

But the Scriptures do invite us to be thankful. Maybe you have someone in your life who was like Dorothy to you. A stranger or a family member who went above and beyond to do some type of act of care and love and grace toward you. An act that maybe you will never be able to repay but has helped to make you into the person that you are today.

The Scripture that we read gives testimony to something else that we are invited to be thankful for. And this is the most important blessing that any of us should be thankful for. And that is that Jesus Christ is the priest and sacrifice that has opened up our way to God.

We are not alone, and we are not lost. Christ is our open door through the love and sacrifice that he has offered on our behalf.

So maybe we do not have to be thankful because it falls on the calendar. Maybe we can be thankful for special people and the risen Christ because that is what makes a difference in our lives. AMEN.

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-Gwin, Connor, <http://www.mbird.com/2018/11/you-dont-have-to-be-grateful/>

-Pasha, Shaheen, <https://narratively.com/searching-woman-saved-immigrant-family-homelessness/>

-Given: November 25, 2018 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)