

How Africans Taught Me to Be Thankful

I love Africa. I've made many trips there, and I just returned from 13 days of ministry in Kenya and Uganda. My friends in those countries would have loved to fly home with me. Some joked about hiding in my suitcase. To them, America is a land of limitless opportunity.

Yet when I return from a foreign trip, I notice many Americans don't appreciate how blessed we are. We gripe about our First-World problems. We are clueless about how most people live in the real world.

When I sit down to a big Thanksgiving meal this week, I'm going to thank God for the things I've taken for granted:

I am thankful for food. One pastor I met this week in Uganda said when he was growing up in his small village, "Breakfast was a miracle, lunch was a sign and a wonder and dinner was a breakthrough." Many Africans don't know where their next meal will come from. Families struggle to scrape up enough money to feed their children some *ugali* (corn meal mush) or *matoke* (mashed green bananas). Meat is an expensive delicacy.

I am thankful for my house. On Tuesday, I visited a pastor who lives in a two-room apartment in the Ugandan village of Migeera. The kitchen is on a stoop outside the front door. The bathroom is in a separate building and is shared by several families. Yet Ugandans from rural areas would consider this home extravagant compared to their one-room mud huts.

I am thankful for running water and indoor toilets. I've had to take bucket baths with cold water on some of my Africa trips because water pressure is either low or water isn't available. On my recent trip to Kenya, my hosts boiled water on their stove so I could have a warm bath. And many Africans

use a spade to dig their own latrines; then they cover their waste with dirt.

I am thankful for reliable electricity. I've been quick to complain when a storm knocks out the power in my home for a few hours. Yet the majority of Ugandans are not connected to the power grid, and they burn wood for cooking. In the nation of Malawi, in southern Africa, 80 percent of the population lacks access to electricity. They use kerosene lanterns for light.

I am thankful for health care. Many Ugandans don't live past 60 because of disease and the hardships of life. I've met several people there who said their mothers died in childbirth. While we certainly need to reform our own health care system, we should be grateful that one of America's biggest challenges is caring for elderly people who would not have survived in other countries.

I am thankful I can read. In one of the churches I visited in Uganda, 60 percent of the members are illiterate. This is usually because their parents couldn't afford to pay their school fees.

I am thankful for my car. Only a minority of Ugandans own their own vehicles. Most people use public transportation—usually vans packed full of travelers or motorcycle taxis called *boda bodas*. And many people walk or ride bicycles for miles in the hot sun to get anywhere.

I am thankful for inexpensive fuel. I complained when the cost of fuel jumped 50 cents a gallon after Hurricane Harvey closed refineries. Yet today, gas has leveled to \$ per gallon. In Uganda, the price is about \$ a gallon, yet wages are just a fraction of ours. That makes travel impossible for many people there.

I am thankful for good roads. In the United States, we have the most advanced road system in the world, with multi-lane

interstates, modern drainage systems and reliable bridges. When I was in Kenya, I drove on a major highway that was only partially paved and had potholes the size of whole cars. A 100-mile journey can take a whole day because of rough conditions.

I am thankful for our democratic system of government. While I was in Africa this week, President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe resigned after a majority of his people demanded his ouster. He has been in power since 1980. Many other African countries suffer because the leaders they elected became tyrants who abused power and stashed billions of dollars of government funds in private accounts.

Many Americans today are fuming, either because they didn't like what President Obama did for eight years or because they hate what President Trump is doing today. But the real blessing is that the United States places term limits on its leaders. We don't tolerate dictatorship. Our founders established a system of law that is bigger than one person.

This Thanksgiving, look around and count the blessings you've failed to notice. Before you complain about your poor wi-fi signal, your long commute to work, the annoying passenger on your flight, the quality of service at your favorite steak house or the poor cell phone service on your Caribbean cruise, think about how many people in the world would trade places with you. Be grateful.