

THANKSGIVING

Psalm 100
Luke 18:9-14

Faith Community
November 18, 2007

Introduction

One of the wonderful things about my job is that people often talk with me at a much deeper level than everyday conversation. I was thinking about the people who have expressed profound gratitude – the man just out of successful surgery who says, “God has been so good to me in my life. I have a wife I don’t deserve, the greatest kids anyone could ever ask for; I have been given tremendous opportunities. I am so thankful for my life.”

Or the elderly woman who looks back over her life and is filled with gratitude – for her great grandchildren, grandchildren, children. She talks about the rich life she has lived, the many enduring friendships, the hope her faith has brought her, and the road ahead – that she can walk without fear.

It’s important to step back from the confusion of our everyday lives and remember the gifts we have been given, the good things we have received that we had nothing to do with.

I

Thanksgiving is the recognition, at the most basic level, that what we have has been given to us. The things that matter most to us in life we can’t accomplish on our own. Thanksgiving is a time to step back and realize that we haven’t done it all ourselves. We have to thank others – especially God – for what we have been given.

At the first Thanksgiving the pilgrims gave thanks for surviving in the new land and for successful crops to make it through the winter. They gave thanks to God. They realized that while they plowed the fields and planted the seeds, and cared for them, they couldn’t make the crops grow. They could help, but they couldn’t cause the plants to produce.

When we were in Massachusetts a few years ago we visited the Plymouth colony where they have a living replica of that first village. It’s a dramatic experience in understanding how hard life was for them. But they came through that difficult situation, harvested their crops, and thanked God for the hope they had.

They had a clear understanding that what they needed most they couldn’t do by themselves. They had to rely of forces beyond themselves; they trusted in God, and thanked God.

As we celebrate Thanksgiving, we realize that so much of what is important to us we are not able to create ourselves.

II

In our world we tend to emphasize how much we do for ourselves. We look at where we are and how much we have, and think how well we have done. Maybe it’s part of the American independent spirit, but we like to look at how much we’ve done for ourselves.

We talk about pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps, making our own success. We often like to think we are successful because we have done it all ourselves. Certainly our efforts are important, but few of us reach achievements all by ourselves.

I think about my own situation. “How did you get your education?” Well, I earned my undergraduate degree, and worked hard for my masters and then doctorate. But then I ask myself, “Would you have done that if you happen to have been born into a family that was homeless? What if you had been born into a family in the slums of a city and gone to poor schools? What if your parents hadn’t valued education?”

I didn’t have anything to do with where I was born. There is nothing about that which I can take credit for, and yet, so much of what I have is a result of where and to whom I was born. I was given gifts that I had nothing to do with.

We call it “grace” when you are freely given something you didn’t earn - and couldn’t earn.

III

Thanksgiving is the recognition that there is one who is beyond us who we can thank. As hard as we may have worked, and as smart as we may be, where we are isn’t all our own doing.

We thank the One beyond us for the goodness we have received.

In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, the righteous Pharisee goes on about the wonderful things he does – he fasts twice a week, he gives ten percent of his total income. This part of the parable stands out because he starts almost every sentence with “I.”

But the tax collector never says “I.” He simply says, “God, be merciful to me a sinner.” Jesus says the one who was justified was not the one who listed his accomplishments but the one who turned to God for help. The Pharisee offers thanks through self-congratulations; the tax collector relies on God. The Pharisee trusts himself; the tax collector trusts God.

Bookstores are filled with self-help books on everything from building self-confidence to losing weight; from getting rich to overcoming depression; from finding a spouse to making a fortune in real estate. OK, that last one isn’t selling real well right now!

This is a huge section in bookstores because these books sell. We think we can fix it all ourselves - a little knowledge, a little hard work, and we can do it all. Happiness becomes like fixing the kitchen sink. Get the book, work at it, we have everything we need.

Haven’t you seen the person who continually is searching for happiness in one book after another; trying one program after another; always following the latest idea and the newest fad?

Do we forget that one came to us offering the water that would satisfy so that we will never be thirsty again, and bread that fills so we will never be hungry again?

The more we experience the presence of God, the more content we are. The more we realize what we have to be thankful for, the more we are able to freely give to others.

IV

As Christians our greatest thanks is for what God has done in Jesus, the Messiah. What we couldn't do for ourselves, God did for us. We couldn't save ourselves, and God came to us to save us. The most important thing in our lives – its meaning and future – is something we can't earn or work to accomplish. There is no self-help book for it. The ultimate hope for our lives is totally beyond our ability to accomplish, and God gives it to us freely. We don't have to earn it. We can't earn what God gives us; we can only accept it - with thanksgiving.

Conclusion

At Thanksgiving we recognize how much we have been given. We realize how much we have gotten that we didn't earn and didn't even have anything to do with. Some are gifts we can clearly see – like artistic talent or musical skill or a good head for numbers; some are opportunities that have opened before us like an invitation; and some seem to be plain luck, like parents, family or IQ. But these things were given to us, without us doing anything on our part.

In all of our thankfulness the life and teachings of Jesus stand at the top of the list. Christ's death and resurrection provide new life for all of us. Christ gives to us what the apostle Paul called, "The life that is life indeed." We have so much to be thankful for.

Amen