A THOUSAND TIMES THANK YOU

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton
November 18, 2007
Scripture: Psalm 136; Luke 17: 12-19

I am trying to figure out what happened to the autumn! Yesterday it was summer, and tomorrow it's Christmas. Halloween got fitted in there somewhere, ever so briefly. I still remember the candy corn. But here it is almost Thanksgiving and as usual, time is out of hand. The Christmas catalogs started arriving in September. Thanksgiving, were it not for the parade, might almost be forgotten, as giving thanks so often is.

Nevertheless, come Thursday, we will be sitting down to a table of favorite food, most of us. Even the homeless shelters and soup kitchens will be serving a traditional Thanksgiving meal of ham and turkey and stuffing, sweet potatoes and corn, and pumpkin pie.

Of course there is nothing historically traditional about any of these foods. The Pilgrims at that first Thanksgiving feast most likely did not have pigs with them, so no ham. Sweet potatoes had not yet been introduced to New England. Cranberries might have been available, but sugar was not, so no cranberry sauce. And while the filling for a pumpkin pudding might have been possible, sweetened by honey or syrup, there was no crust or whipped topping. And of course, no football, no television, no gigantic helium balloons!

The Pilgrims had cod and bass and herring and shad available. Clams and lobsters and mussels and oysters. Wild turkey perhaps, goose or duck, cranes and swans, and deer. They occasionally ate eagles, which "tasted like mutton," notes Pilgrim Edward Winslow in a letter written in 1623. There were peas and squash and beans, walnuts and chestnuts and hickory nuts abounding. And the Pilgrims had brought on board the Mayflower seeds for planting radishes, lettuce, carrots, onions and cabbage. So it still was a bountiful meal.

That first Thanksgiving celebration took place at some unknown date most likely in early October. And it wasn't until Lincoln's thanksgiving proclamation in 1863 that Thanksgiving was linked to the anchoring of the Mayflower at Plymouth Rock on November 21, 1620.

Edward Winslow writes of it this way,

> Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors. …many of the Indians [came] amongst us, and among the rest their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five deer, which they brought to the plantation and bestowed on our governor, and upon the captain and others. And although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want that we often wish you partakers of our plenty.[1]

It is amazing that they gave thanks at all that first year. Of the 102 Pilgrims who left on the Mayflower, one died on the voyage over, one was born, and by spring of the following year forty had died of illness, cold and privation. It was a harsh and bitter winter of 1620 and they were ill prepared for what they experienced in this new land.

A scouting party went ashore and found the land harsh. There was snow half a foot deep and the fierce wind blew the spray of the sea on them where it froze until their clothes "looked like coats of iron." Among those who died that first winter were Governor Carver and the wives of William Bradford, Edward Winslow, and Myles Standish.

Nevertheless, they gave thanks for what they had, for peaceful relations with Massasoit and the native Indians, for the harvest and the food that they had taken in, and for surviving. The following spring when the Mayflower set sail to return to England, not a single pilgrim among them returned which says, perhaps, more than anything about their love of and thankfulness for the new land where they had settled.

What made them grateful? What makes any of us so grateful that we stop and give thanks for what we have and who we are? A harsh winter, a hard crossing, a new land, a life uprooted, the Pilgrims even though they had given up much, nevertheless were moved with gratitude for life and for survival. For all their losses they saw themselves as fortunate, and so they gave thanks.

We give thanks for many things. A close call with our health. The safe birth of a child or grandchild, a raise in salary, a new job, a strike settled well and going back to work, the exam passed, the soldier returned safely, the successful surgery, a day without pain, a peaceful end… all reasons for giving thanks, for offering up appreciation for the good there is in life. Much of the time we give thanks because in spite of plenty we all of us have known some want in life. We know what it is to do without, to not have, to realize how much we have in the face of a world that often has too little.

Luke tells a story of giving thanks. It is a story of ten lepers who are cleansed by Jesus, restored to health and freed from the social and physical stigma of their illness. They all do as Jesus instructs, go to the priest as the law requires and confirm with him their healing. But one among them, one unlike the others, returns and gives praise to God and thanks to Jesus for what he has received. One alone, among the twelve was moved by something the others weren't. And why? "Were not ten made clean?" Jesus asks. "The other nine, where are they?"

It's worth a sermon sometime to inquire about the nine, and where they went and what they did and why they did not give thanks. Maybe one was so giddy with joy he forgot to give thanks. Perhaps another was so anxious to get to his wife and family that gratitude was the last thing on his mind. Maybe one held a grudge against God for the imposition of the illness altogether. And perhaps another had known so much rejection and isolation that his life grew bitter, unable to give thanks. Who knows what can happen to the human spirit held in captivity, when suddenly freed?

Luke gives us a clue as to why the one leper returned to give thanks, and the nine did not. He tells us that the one thankful leper, was a Samaritan, an outcast, one who had suffered not only physical pain, but also social dislocation. Samaritans were despised by

the Jews of Jesus' day. And in this man's case, maybe it was the kindness of Jesus, reaching across prejudice, bridging isolation that moved him to return and say thanks.

Sometimes I think the only thing that separates gratitude from ingratitude is a thoroughgoing awareness of the vulnerability and frailty of life, the awareness that comes when you empty yourself, or life empties you, and you realize that without God there is not much.

A couple of weeks ago, our own member, F. Murray Abraham spoke to a group of people gathered to support our Presbyterian Camp program at Holmes, New York. He told a moving personal story of growing up in El Paso, Texas where as a teenager he was headed in the wrong direction. A member of a gang, growing up tough, trying to survive, life was not easy. But someone stepped into his life, a woman who told him he could be an actor, someone who saw in him more than he saw in himself. And it turned his life around. He gave thanks that night he spoke to us for that person who saw in him something that even he had missed. And I suspect that all around this sanctuary there are countless stories we might tell of people who once upon a time told us that we were good, that something within us was valuable, that we might be much more than we had yet imagined.

Sometimes it is only when we reach inside ourselves and know that place where life has been painful, or embarrassing, or hurtful, and realize that we have come through it that we can truly appreciate that for which we are most thankful.

The New Testament scholar Alan Culpepper has written that "gratitude may be the purest measure of one's character and spiritual condition."[2] And yet, gratitude runs so counter to the culture around us. The prevailing view of many people is that everything I have is mine. I earned it. I deserve it. I choose whether or not to share it. No one got it for me but me. And it's not a matter of thanksgiving or gratitude; it's a matter of having the smarts to capitalize on what you have. Being in the right place at the right time. All that kind of thing. These are the mantras of many of today's successful people. Corporate motivational speakers are making a handsome living stoking this line of thinking. Ayn Rand on steroids.

Why is it that we do not see that so much of life is a gift, that it comes from nothing that we did to earn it? But instead it comes as a blessing to which the only appropriate response is thanksgiving? We take so much for granted, don't you know?

In Thornton Wilder's play, *Our Town*, after Emily dies she returns to her home for one last look at the world she is leaving. She chooses to look again at her twelfth birthday, and as she begins to relive the day she sees something important.

> I didn't realize, Emily says. So all that was going on and we never noticed! Take me back – up to the hill to my grave. But first: Wait! One more look! Goodbye! Goodbye! Goodbye, Papa – Goodbye to clocks ticking – and my butternut tree! And Mama's sunflowers – and food and coffee – and new ironed dresses and hot baths – and sleeping and waking up! – Oh earth, you're too wonderful for anyone to realize you! Do any human beings ever realize while they live it – every minute? The

stage manager answers softly, "No – Saints and poets maybe – they do some."[3]

And I would add lepers. At least one leper. That leper who returned and gave thanks to Jesus, who realized for one passing moment that life is a gift, and health is so precious, and kindness is the milk at the breast of God that sustains our lives, because God is the giver of all good gifts. Maybe it takes the healing of our leprosy to make us truly grateful.

Or maybe it simply takes an openness of heart, so receptive that out of our poverty of spirit, we are able to see how much it is that we have already been given.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, writing of a life reduced to its essence in his work, **The Gulag Archipelago**, gives this advice on the basics of thanksgiving. He writes:

> Do not pursue what is illusory – property or position: all that is gained at the expense of your nerves decade after decade, and is confiscated in one fell night… don't be afraid of misfortune and do not yearn after happiness… the bitter does not last forever, and the sweet never fills the cup to overflowing. It is enough if you don't freeze in the cold and if thirst and hunger don't claw at your insides. If your back isn't broken, if your feet can walk, if both arms can bend, if both eyes see, and if both ears hear, then whom should you envy? And why? Our envy devours us most of all. Rub your eyes and purify your heart – and prize above all else in the world those who love you and wish you well. Do not hurt them or scold them, and never part from any of them in anger…[4]

I suspect today, in this place there are among us *thank yous* a thousand times over for good gifts and blessings and joy deeply felt and kindness happily received. For people who have touched our lives and brought forth from us some flame of life that was but an ember before and barely seen.

And were we to name them all, we would all day long and in every day to come be endlessly thanking God for all that we have seen and known and received, for the great gifts and the small. Forgive me if I remember a few of my own thanks.

In the morning I wake up and see the sun rising, and feel the cool snap of the air on my face, and give thanks that I have lived one more day. The leaves are changing now, giving up their colors in dying, and reaching bare tree arms to the sky to offer thanks for another season of praise, and I join them in doing so.

I think about the people who have touched my life. The teachers, doctors and surgeons, pastors and counselors, and colleagues in ministry, friends and parishioners, the dear hearts that I have loved along the way and they who have loved me in return.

I think of my sisters and my brother, my parents and my family. I think with gratitude of this nation, so just, so fair, so rightly inspired, so nobly constituted; so far from home these days, whose flaws are acknowledged, repented, and on the way to repairing pray God; a nation that I knew and believed in as a boy, that may have never been, but that I long for once again, nonetheless, from afar. The earth in this land that returning soldiers kiss when they come home.

I think of you, this goodly company of saints and give thanks. And I give thanks each day that I may minister among you, and for the encouragement you give me that the whole Christian church may be more like what this congregation is and others like it with its arms wide open to all who would come in.

Those are among my thanks in these days of giving thanks. I add mine to all the *thank yous* a thousand times over for all the good gifts and kindly blessings and joy deeply felt that we have happily received.

It was Meister Eckhart, that Dominican mystic of the 14th Century, who put it so well so long ago. "If the only prayer you say in your whole life is thank you," he said, "that would suffice." And so it might.

Happy Thanksgiving to you all. And thanks to be to God for all the good gifts of our lives.

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[1] Edward Winslow, December 12, 1621, in **Mourt's Relation: A Journal of the Pilgrims at Plymouth**. Chapter 6

[2] Alan Culpepper, Luke, **The New Interpreter's Bible** (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 327.

[3] Thornton Wilder, **Our Town**. (Acting Edition: New York, Coward-McCann, 1965) 83.

[4] Alexander Solzhenitsyn, **The Gulag Archipelago**.