

WHATEVER COMES
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
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Reading: Colossians 1: 11 – 20 (NEB)

May he strengthen you, in his glorious might, with ample power to meet whatever comes with fortitude, patience, and joy; and to give thanks to the Father who has made you fit to share the heritage of God's people in the realm of light.

He secured us from the domain of darkness and brought us away into the kingdom of his dear Son, in whom our release is secured and our sins forgiven. He is the image of the invisible God; his is the primacy over all created things. In him everything in heaven and on earth was created, not only things visible but also the invisible orders of thrones, sovereignties, authorities, and powers: the whole universe have been created through him and for him. And he exists before everything, and all things are held together in him. He is, moreover, the head of the body, the church. He is its origin, the first to return from the dead, to be in all things alone supreme. For in him the complete being of God, by God's own choice came to dwell. Through him God chose to reconcile the whole universe to himself, making peace through the shedding of his blood upon the cross – to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, through him alone.

This Thursday is, of course, Thanksgiving. As your minister I thought I would offer you some guidelines for that cornucopia of plenty. The question is how you will know when you have eaten too much:

- ✚ The paramedics have to use the Jaws of Life to pry you out of the E-Z chair.
- ✚ The amount of potatoes you ate sets off another famine in Ireland.
- ✚ You receive a Sumo wrestler application in the mail.
- ✚ You have grass stains on your butt after you take a walk, even though you never sat down.
- ✚ The nurse draws blood for your cholesterol screening but all she gets is gravy.
- ✚ Your wife wears a life vest every time she gets into the waterbed with you.
- ✚ The rash on your stomach turns out to be steering wheel burns.
- ✚ You consider gluttony a patriotic duty.¹

Food is the most common medium of thanksgiving any time of the year. We break bread and hoist a cup in celebration of life's many gifts.

¹ Author unknown, <http://www.allfunpix.com/thanksgiving/overdid.htm>, downloaded 11/16/10.

Thanksgiving is my very favorite holiday, even above Christmas and Easter. I love it because it is really so very simple. It is about families, friends, and communities gathering together around a table of food and giving thanks for the blessings of life. There are no miracles save that of food and community. There are no extraterrestrial events and no manipulation of the natural order. At Thanksgiving I do not have to contort reason with myth or fidget with scriptural passages such as the slaughter of the innocents that has no verification in history. I do not have to wrestle with biological improbabilities pre or post *humanae vitae*.

At Thanksgiving we sit down to the concrete evidence of God's providence; celebrate the soil, sun, and rain; and wonder at the skilled hands that plowed the fields, harvested the crops, milled the flour, and shaped the dough. And even as we gather at Thanksgiving farmers will still need to get up at 4:00 A.M. to milk the cows, slop the hogs, birth the foals, and gather the eggs. I overheard a farmer at the Farm and Ranch show last week say, "Boy, I am sick of beans." He was referring to the harvest of soybeans, but you can bet he is already thinking about next spring's planting.

This reading from Paul's letter to Colossae is an affirmation that the universe is woven with the grace of God. Now it is very easy to take this passage and make it about the doctrine of the Trinity. The author states that Christ was with God and in God and is now the head of the cosmos. Quite frankly, I do not understand that and I confess to my radical Unitarian belief that there is one God, at the most. I am satisfied to know that the earth is the body of God and such grace is sufficient. I get lost in all of the Neo-Platonic arguments about Godheads and realms. I do not think in the end

that it matters much. But it matters very much that I am thankful for the continuous gift of life. Anne Sexton put it this way in her poem, “Welcome Morning.”

There is joy
 in all:
 in the hair I brush each morning,
 in the Cannon towel, newly washed,
 that I rub my body with each morning,
 in the chapel of eggs I cook
 each morning,
 in the outcry from the kettle
 that heats my coffee
 each morning,
 in the spoon and the chair
 that cry “Hello there, Anne”
 each morning,
 in the godhead of the table
 that I set my silver, plate, cup upon
 each morning.

All this is God,
 right here in my pea-green house
 each morning
 and I mean,
 though often forget
 to give thanks,
 to faint down by the kitchen table
 in a prayer of rejoicing
 as the holy birds at the kitchen window
 peck into their marriage of seeds.

So while I think of it,
 let me paint a thank-you on my palm
 for this God, this laughter of the morning,
 lest it go unspoken.

The Joy that isn't shared, I've heard,
 dies young.²

This Thanksgiving Mimi, Emily, Wes and I will sit down to a meal of turkey, sweet potato soufflé, mashed potatoes, dressing and gravy, pumpkin pie, and

² Anne Sexton, “Welcome Morning,” *Good Poems*, selected and introduced by Garrison Keillor (New York: Viking, 2002), pp. 5-6.

cranberries. Each one is a blessing of sight, smell, and taste. With these gifts we will remember Thanksgiving dinners of the past when we were able to be with our extended family. And those of our parents and grandparents who have died will sit with us at the table of memory. We will wonder why we cannot quite duplicate my mother's mincemeat pies. We will think about those Thanksgiving dinners at Mimi's parents house when cousins would slip away to climb the large tree in the backyard. When they got old enough to drive they packed off to Borders bookstore or Starbucks. The young have little patience for reminiscing on the back porch. We could be sad and get nostalgic. Or we can be thankful that our lifetime of Thanksgiving has been so rich.

That, of course, is the challenge. How can Thanksgiving be more than an annual event? I think we need to figure that out because the third Thursday in November is fast becoming a pre-cooked packaged meal from the local grocery store. You can even order your fully cooked Thanksgiving dinner on line. It will be delivered to your door Thanksgiving Day. I think it is like the high carbohydrate meal that athletes eat before the big marathon. Only in this case the race is the black Friday shopping mania. But even that has changed. I think black Friday actually is starting this Monday morning.

The fourteenth century German theologian, philosopher, and mystic, Meister Eckhart, wrote, "If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is **"thank you"**, it will be enough." Eckhart did not say if only once in your life time you say "thank you" if will be enough. He is suggesting that our daily prayer, our hourly prayer, might be "thank you." Thank you God for the opportunity to see the morning sun, for

breakfast, for family, for friends, for work, for lunch, for the birds in the city park, for dinner, for the flash of meteors running on the night's sky. Thank you for laughter, music, dancing, and silence. Thank you for doctors, nurses, technicians, and pharmacists. Thank you for compassion, soup kitchens, hygiene pantries, Interfaith Ministries, Breakthrough Clubs and all of the people who work and volunteer in them. Thank you for preachers, Sunday school teachers, choir directors, singers and instrumentalists. Thank you for janitors, administrators, secretaries, and all of the unseen people that make every institution work. Thank you for writers, artists, sculptors, and dancers. Thank you for books. Thank you for technology and the switches turn it off!

These are just a few of the thousands of things for which I could offer thanks every day. And the truth is that if some of these things were lost to me I would be diminished and probably be complaining quite a bit. It is also true that I do not stop often enough and give thanks.

I think we are sometimes like our dog Simba. God wasted taste buds when the good Lord gave them to dogs. Food never touches Simba's taste buds. It could be a juicy sirloin steak or a cheap hotdog. He snaps it down without savoring it. Gulp and its gone! He never says thank you and always acts as if he is the most food deprived animal on the planet. He will tell everyone who comes into the kitchen, "No, I've not been fed yet." He parks himself under the dining room table waiting for the least bit of food spilled to the floor. And it is never enough.

Eckhart's point is that the earth and the fullness thereof is the constant occasion of thanksgiving. If we never stop to appreciate it and ponder our gratitude

our stomachs might be full but our souls will be empty. Our homes might be stuffed with more things than we will ever use but our hearts will be shallow. We will be nothing more than consumers and marketing targets and debtors. We are surrounded by more bounty than can be measured. Our Christian faith is anemic because we lack the one thing that makes providence meaningful. We lack gratitude and we do not practice the first prayer of life, the prayer of thanksgiving. Perhaps we have been mistaken to rush our children to recite the Lord's Prayer. Perhaps their souls are better formed around the simple mealtime prayer, "For health and strength and daily bread we give Thee thanks, O Lord."

Any thinking person is going to protest. Not everyone has as much to be thankful for as we do. I think of the 14% of Wichitans that live below the poverty level. I think of members and friends of this church who suffer from debilitating disease and death. There are women and men across the membership of this congregation and the world who suffer. Is there cause for them to be thankful?

"No," if that means a simplistic pietism that chides, "Count your many blessings, name them one by one." No if thanksgiving is lived beyond the realities of struggle, the patience of hard work, the reality of failure, and the ever presence of death. Thanksgiving is sterile if it is nothing more than a greeting card or commercial jingle. In my experience the people who are deeply thankful are the people who have struggled and suffered and know a real blessing when they meet one.

Consider the wonderful Thanksgiving Hymn, "Now Thank We All Our God." The hymn was written by a Lutheran pastor, Martin Rinckart. Rinckart was the only pastor in the town Eilenburg, Germany, during the Thirty Years War. It became a

town where many refugees from the war gathered. Eilenburg was often overwhelmed by different opposing armies. Because the city was over crowded there was great pestilence. Pastor Rinckart often buried fifty people a day during this siege of battle and disease. And yet, in the midst of this human tragedy he wrote these words:

“Now thank we all our God with hearts and hands and voices,
 Who wondrous things hath done, in whom the world rejoices,
 Who from our mother’s arms, hath blessed us on the way
 With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us,
 With ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us,
 And keep us in his grace, and guide us when perplexed,
 And free us from all ills in this world and the next.

This hymn was not written for church services only. It was meant to be a hymn sung around the tables of people who had buried loved killed in battle or ravaged by cholera and dysentery. People who were crippled or maimed by the inhumanity of war sang it with hearts that could still discern grace.

My hope for us this morning, the Sunday before Thanksgiving, is that beginning with our fellowship coffee and then lunch we gather with our family and friends to offer a word of thanks. It might be a simple ritual asking each person to name one thing they are thankful for that day. My sister-in-law, Anna Leo, often asks everyone to bring his or her favorite poem to read aloud. Perhaps you are in a restaurant and would rather not make a spectacle of prayer in public. Simply take a silent moment to be mindful of the food and people you are going to enjoy. Not one of us, regardless of what we believe about God, is too old, too intelligent or educated, too wealthy, or too burdened to reflect on the many gifts of life that are yet ours. Perhaps you have never engaged in such a personal or family practice. Do not be

embarrassed. Hold hands and say, “I am glad we are all here. Thank you for being with us. Let us be thankful for the food we are about to eat.” Is any one so sophisticated that they cannot offer thanksgiving? If we are we are not fit for the blessings God has given us.

People sometimes ask, what is the one thing – or the next step – that I might take on the path of Christian discipleship. My reply is, “Say a word of thanks.” Be appreciative and deeply grateful for the gifts of life that God puts at your feet every day, even when you ache, when you have to make difficult moral decisions, and the prognosis is grim. Learn to find peace in the wild things and rest in this world that is laced with God’s grace. I close with Wendell Berry’s poem:

The Peace of Wild Things

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world and am free.³

Happy Thanksgiving.

Finis

³ Wendell Berry, “The Peace of Wild Things,” *Good Poems*, p. 426.