

“For This I Am Thankful” Psalm 90:1-12; I Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30
Good Shepherd, Nashua, NH
November 19, 2017
Meg Hess

Thanksgiving is only a few days away now. Turkeys are on order, grocery lists made, table linens ironed (does anyone ever iron table linens anymore?), extra chairs brought in...soon friends and relatives will be coming through the door bearing casserole dishes and pie plates, and we will kiss cheeks red from the cold and pile our coats in the back bedroom. Thanksgiving is a time of memories, food, traditions, togetherness, and for good or ill, family dynamics.

Have you noticed an increase in the number of articles in news papers and online titled: “How to avoid talking about politics at Thanksgiving.” (Anyone worried about this?)

Some of these articles give suggestions and advice ranging from be respectful, pause before you speak, listen carefully... to *avoid political topics at all costs*. Others offer alternative topics of conversation. Talk instead about the 637 pound green bean casserole donated by Green Giant to Meals on Wheels for the Macy’s day parade. Other articles say things like: serve low alcohol wine.

If we think Thanksgiving family gatherings are threatened by political divisiveness today, imagine how it was for this country when Abraham Lincoln first declared that the whole country would celebrate Thanksgiving Day on the fourth Thursday of November. In 1863, when Lincoln wrote the Thanksgiving proclamation, our nation was in the midst of a bloody Civil War. Family members turned on one another as they chose sides in this war. Brother fought brother. Men and women from the same families were deeply divided over the question of slavery. The cut-offs between states and within families were deep and the divisions seemingly insurmountable.

In the midst of that, Lincoln asked the people of this country to “fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it, as soon as may be consistent with the divine purposes, to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility, and union.” It was in this climate that Abraham Lincoln called the nation to prayer, and to the practice of gratitude. History provides a poignant reminder of how we can use this day of Thanksgiving to practice gratitude, which creates a generosity of spirit within us. This attitude of generosity can come in handy as we gather with those with whom we disagree.

Reverend Ed Bacon writes about the connection between gratitude and generosity: “All of the remarkably generous, generative, affluent people I have ever known were profoundly grateful.”¹ He writes: “Ingratitude is arguably the most destructive character trait of all. It destroys relationships and it destroys the human soul... Ingratitude ignores the fact that each one of us is a sea into which some confluence of springs, rivulets, and rivers have flowed. The only way we could have become who we are is through the flow into our lives of the energy of the Beloved and the Beloved’s energy in other persons. Ingratitude says, ‘Everything I have I earned by my own hands; all of it came to me as a result of my own work.’ The Habit of Generosity targets the lie of ingratitude.”²

Our Thanksgiving traditions give us a chance to practice gratitude, and to practice generosity, especially in our relationships with one another around the harvest table.

For what are you thankful? I invite you to take a few minutes to think about at least three things for which you are grateful. You may write them down on the index card you were given this morning, or just hold them in your mind. Take a few minutes to add to your gratitude list. *For what are you thankful?*

I challenge you to pick a day this week, and rehearse gratitude from the time you get up until the time you go to sleep at night. Notice what is in front of you, and express gratitude. Weave gratitude throughout the whole day. And then share what you have noticed- what you are grateful for- when you gather around the Thanksgiving table.

Pick a day to explore gratitude: For the gift of a day, it could be any day, but one day in what the poet Mary Oliver calls this “one wild and precious life,” for this day I am thankful. Come with me into an example of such a day:

- For the way the early morning fog hangs over the water, back lit by the rising sun in a way that makes it seem like more than a new day, but rather the first day at the beginning of time when the mysterious world was “silently sung” into being...for this I am thankful.
- For the way that flour, yeast, salt, and water come together in my hands, kneaded into a shape that is transformed by the alchemical heat of the oven into our daily bread, the smell of the freshly baked loaf saturating the house... for this I am thankful.
- As the day unfolds it reveals its beauty: the sunflower, the rose, the arrangement on the communion table, the rose-breasted grosbeak, the mountains, the rain that “animates the river,” the flock of swallows who spiral, bank, and dive across the November sky as if they are of one mind...for all of this I am thankful.
- As the day grows bright in the world, to engage in meaningful work, and to witness many who are giving, bringing, praying, willing justice into being...for this I am thankful.
- For those who people this day with faith and imagination, who bring poetic clarity and sweetness to our world, whose inspiration unleashes floods of mercy from our hearts...for these I am thankful.
- For those who are what one poet calls “connoisseurs of the abyss” who stagger back from the edge of loss and despair accompanied by a “crowd of sorrows,” (Rumi) and yet still raise their voices and shout “Alleluia!” and “Blessed Be!” in steady proclamation...for these I am thankful.
- As night draws nigh, to view my child in unguarded sleep, to see sleep leach away all of that teen angst until all that is left is her little face sculpted by tenderness...for this I am thankful.
- And at the close of day with all of its fits and starts, sleeping under a sky where the stars drift like dandelion fluff wishes, moonlight flooding my room like a limitless grace, dreaming of beauty and joy, my heart easing to the lullaby of the sacred presence, sensing God in that “close and holy darkness” (Dylan Thomas)... For this I am thankful.

For what are you thankful? Tell us.

AMEN.

¹ Bacon, Ed. 2012. *8 Habits of Love*. P. 26.

² Ibid. P. 22.