

"CATCHING THE THANKSGIVING SPIRIT"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
November 20, 1994

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### INTRODUCTION

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"If God had meant for us to fast on Thanksgiving,  
He would never have created thirty pound turkeys"

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Robert Orben reports on the practice of raising your own holiday turkey. He says that some people are a bit squeamish about this, but that he never was. I think I would be, but he writes that,

"One January we bought a turkey who became like a member of our family. We kept him in the house, fed him and even took him for walks. But when the time came, there was no nonsense about it. We had him for Christmas dinner. He sat there on my right!"

### DEVELOPMENT

Do you have any idea what fruit was responsible for preventing the Pilgrims from starving to death during their first winter in America? The answer is the pumpkin. And the words of a Pilgrim song highlight the Pilgrim's appreciation for the pumpkin's aid in staving off hunger.

"We have pumpkin at morning and pumpkin at noon.  
If it were not for pumpkin, we would be undone."

Those early immigrants to this land did not have it all that easy either. I suppose this is how pumpkin pie came to be a part of the Thanksgiving day meal.

A Florida pastory by the name of John Palmer tells about the first Thanksgiving that he and his bride spent together. Things were tight, sparse for them. He was still in college and his wife was working part-time. There would be no traditional Thanksgiving feast for them that year until Palmer heard a radio ad.

Said the announcer, "Come and test drive the new Buick and we'll give you a free turkey for Thanksgiving".

The young Palmers drove downtown that afternoon, kicked a few tires and test drove a car that looked like one they could afford. They spent a couple of hours discussing payments and what have you. Finally they told the salesman, "We need to go home and think about it and talk it over..."

As they came to the door of the showroom, Palmer said in an offhand way as to make it appear as an afterthought, "What about the turkey mentioned in the commercial?" The salesman's eyes twinkled and he motioned for them to follow him. They went outside, 'round back, to a shed on the rear of the property. He opened the door with a flourish and said, "If you can catch one, he's yours!"

Inside were ten full-grown turkeys. Palmer doesn't tell us what he did at this point. Maybe he and his bride had a turkey for Thanksgiving. And who knows. Maybe the turkey sat on his right!

CATCHING THE SPIRIT OF THANKSGIVING

Anyway, that simple story made me think that the spirit of thanksg really has to be caught! Chances are that most people will celebrate next Thursday without giving a great deal of thought to its significance.

Tom Wicker, writing in the New York Times a few years back said something that touched me. Let me share it with you:

"Thanksgiving Day is a fine and special day, clutter it as we may with indigestion and football. It is a time of the spirit when we let it be, and a time of the heart, despite ourselves".

In the comic strip, "HI and LOIS", the son asks a question as they gather around the Thanksgiving table, "Why do we always have turkey on Thanksgiving?" Lois answers with a bit of uncertainty, "Well....because...because it's a tradition." The son then asks, "And what's a tradition?" At this point his brother breaks in and says, "Something we've been doing for so long that we can't even remember why".

And that's the danger, isn't it? That we will forget what Thanksgiving is all about.

I'll never forget sharing in a Thanksgiving church gathering where the evening ended with a fellowship circle, all present joining hands, and then each participant was invited to say what he or she was especially thankful for. Many of the usual blessings were mentioned, but a ten year old girl with sparkle in her eyes said,

"Oh, I'm just thankful that I am thankful!"

And that seems to me like a healthy emotion to have. Really, we ought to be thankful that we are thankful.

AWARE OF OUR DEBTS

For one thing, when we are thankful, we are aware of our debts.

An English poet by the name of Laurence Binyon wrote these lines about the dead of World War I. He wrote,

"They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old;  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun, and in the morning,  
We will remember them."

A country that forgets its history really doesn't deserve a future. A lot of people have made great sacrifices so that we can have this free and this prosperous land. And here I'm not talking just about soldiers but about parents and grandparents. I'm talking about farmers and factory workers and coal miners. I'm talking about people who have worked hard all their lives without much to show for it except the dream that some day their children

would live much better.

Ross Perot has told about the day that Mort Myerson became the president of Electronic Data Systems. Mort Myerson's 95 year old grandfather was there. Mort's grandfather was forced to flee Russia many years ago because he happened to be a Jew. For eighteen months he lived in an attic over in Brooklyn working as a tailor he could get enough money to buy a train ticket to Fort Worth, Texas. He reared a fine young son there and that son became Mort Myerson's father. And now granddad was there to see Mort become president of a major corporation. At the end of that meeting, Mort's grandfather came forward with tears in his eyes and hugged Mort and said,

"Son, through you I have fulfilled all of the dreams  
that I had as a young man when I came to America."

That's the kind of debt many of us owe this day. I believe it is a debt that is owed to men and women whose names we don't even know, but they worked hard and they worshipped and kept little churches alive across this land and in some cases they even gave their lives that we might have the many benefits you and I celebrate next Thursday. Yes, when we are thankful, we acknowledge that we are in debt.

WE HAVE RESPONSIBILITIES

When we are thankful, we also acknowledge that we have responsibilities. And those responsibilities are not to our ancestors, but to our descendants. Remember that old Amish saying:

"We didn't inherit the land from our fathers,  
we are borrowing it from our children....."

I like what Carl Sagan said in commenting on the work of the Voyager spacecraft,

"We have not found even a trace of life. Voyager reminds us of the rarity and the preciousness of life on earth and our responsibility to preserve it"

You and I have been given an amazing gift...a beautiful and a prosperous land, a free land. Nothing we have done could have earned this privilege for us. Will our children and our grandchildren be able to say the same?

Thanksgiving would be a good time to consider the kind of country our earliest ancestors found when they stepped forth on to this continent. It was a land of pristine mountains and pure lakes where all manner of animals roamed in abundance - three and one-half million miles of splendor from "sea to shining sea". Today we have asphalt in place of animals, while skyscrapers shield the splendor. What kind of America will our grandchildren find? It certainly won't be the land our ancestors found three hundred years ago.

Of course, the abuse of mother earth is nothing new. King Solomon sent work crews out to cut the cedars of Lebanon to build the great Temple and a palace and grand buildings in Jerusalem. The denuded slopes of the mountains washed down and polluted the land and waters below. Today there are only about a dozen of the cedars of Lebanon left and I understand an iron fence has been built around them to preserve them from the tourists, in a kind of museum.

I remember once reading that about four hundred years later that Plato warned the Greek people to stop cutting the trees, but they went right on cutting and cutting to make boats for commerce, boats for war. Today that area is one of the most environmentally damaged and stressed parts of the world. Environmental battles are really nothing new. Thanksgiving is a good time for us to reflect on our stewardship of our own land and our responsibilities to those who come after us. When we are thankful, we acknowledge our debts and our responsibilities. As the Bible reminds us,

"To whom much is given, much also is expected!"

THANKFUL, WE AFFIRM OUR FAITH IN GOD

And finally, when we are thankful, we affirm our faith in God. Have you ever thoughts how empty, how cold it would be to have all the bountiful blessings that you and I enjoy and have no one to thank. Someone has pointed out that thanksgiving is no holiday for atheists.

Hal Olsen, a veteran missionary from Kenya, told of a doctor who had come to the mission field to use his skills to relieve suffering and pain. On one occasion he performed a delicate operation that saved the life of a woman. As she recovered, she didn't express even one word of appreciation and the doctor was hurt, and puzzled. Olsen said,

"One of the first lessons a new missionary must learn is that the people to whom he's been called aren't waiting with open arms to applaus his coming. Some tribal languages have no words to express the idea of 'THANK YOU'".

I think that 'way down deep we all have a need to stop and say thank you. Most especially are we thankful at Thanksgiving time for our freedom. Some of you may remember how Nikita Krushev, when Premier of the then powerful Soviet Union, roared defiantly at the citizens of the free world, "We will bury you". Not too long ago Krushev's son was granted citizenship in the United States of America. Need I remind all of you how truly blessed we are as a people. And that is why we heed the words out of the Old Testament, penned by the writer of the Book of Deuteronomy,

"And you shall bless the Lord, your God, for the good land that He has given you".

CLOSING

I don't know about you, but I'm thankful to be thankful. And I'm thankful that you are thankful. When we are truly thankful, then we remember our debts to those who have gone before us. We remember our responsibilities to those who will come after us. And in that remembering, we affirm our faith in the living God who has given us every good thing. Amen. And Amen!

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PRAYER

O God, the very Source of all that makes life possible and the Giver of all that makes life good, accept the thanks we give to You this day. We confess that we have often failed to live our thankfulness. And that what we have we so often take for granted, grumbling about what we lack. We have squandered Your bounty with little thought of those who will come after us. We are guilty at times of being troubled by the few who have more than by the many who have less. In this hour of worship, help us to the spirit of real thanks-giving. In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray.

PASTORAL PRAYER: November 20, 1994

FATHER GOD, YOUR hand has touched our dust and given us the gift of life.

You have given us the sense of sight to see flowers and friends.

You have given us the sense of sound to hear words and wind.

You have given us the sense of touch to feel and to explore the world in which we live.

AWAKEN US, O LORD:

To the wonders of the world around us,  
To the sights and the sounds of nature,  
To the presence of those who surround us,  
To the mysteries of life that we cannot comprehend,  
To the simple joys that we can experience.

THEN WE CAN BECOME THANKFUL -

That we are alive,  
That we can see, hear and experience.  
That we can think and remember,  
That we can love and be loved.  
That we can wonder and explore.  
That we can pray and can praise You.

LORD, WE THANK YOU

For being patient with us,  
For not forgetting us when we forget You.  
For loving and forgiving us.  
For being with us now.

For music and singing,  
For rest and leisure.  
For laughter and joy.  
For those who understand.

MOST OF ALL, WE THANK YOU FOR NOT withholding the blessings of life from us even though we take them for granted.

TAKE US FROM OUR WORSHIP into the world where we turn words of thanksgiving into deeds of loving service.

All of this in the name and spirit of Christ.

SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM: Sunday, November 20, 1994

TODAY

Friends...today is another one of those very SPECIAL Sundays for us all....as we pause to celebrate the Sacrament of Infant Baptism.

This morning we are baptizing CHRISTOPHER MICHAEL KELLY, infant son of Cheryl and Kevin Kelly...born on the 20th day of June, 1994.

Christopher is blessed not only by loving parents...but also by loving God parents...Ellen Davis and Terence Jarman....who will be standing with Cheryl and Kevin.

And again this morning, we invite the congregation to be a part of this moment by answering a vow with the words:

"WE WILL, BY THE GRACE OF GOD!"

GATHER AT THE FONT

I would invite Kevin and Cheryl to join me here at the baptismal font....

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ANNOUNCEMENTS: November 20, 1994

GREETING / VISITORS

- A. We greet the visitors in the congregation this morning....delighted to have you with us on this Sunday before THANKSGIVING...and hope we'll have the opportunity to.....
- B. Be free in the sharing of your name with us...fill out a visitor card, or sign one of the Guest Books. Come, worship with us. Come, work with us....doing the Lord's work here at this busy corner.... since 1837. Roots are deep in the soil. We minister in the name and spirit of Christ...and it is in His loving spirit that we....
- C. One of the joys of a longterm pastorate is welcoming back some dear friends of former days who have been part of this fellowship...and sat in the pews many Sundays....with us today is a former Lay Leader of this church....Harold W. Black and his wife, Deborah... met and were married here...and all five children were baptized here. And also with us today is a former president of the UMW (back then, WSCS)....Minnie McCartney, of Freeport, Long Island. The Blacks live in Boyertown, Pa.. Harold's works were numerous and I'll tell you a bit more about these wonderful people at the coffee hour.

A ROSE ON THE ALTAR

- A. Again today, there's a rose on the altar....there to celebrate the birth of

PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns are lifted up for you in the bulletin and I invite you to review them in these moments noting that the Education Committee meets today at one to finalize plans for Christmas and the pageant.
- B. Next Sunday we shall usher in the ADVENT SEASON...children will be in church and we shall light the first of our four Advent candles. Hope you'll be here for that warm and special moment as we begin our annual journey to Bethlehem.
- C. New members will be received into the church three weeks from today. December 11th. Share word with me if you're tempted with the idea of a closer tie through membership with this city parish.
- D. Our Financial Canvass continues and here to bring us up to date and to inspire us to achieve our goal quickly and joyfully is...

( over )

- E. A word of sincere THANK YOU to all who worked long and hard at yesterday's church Fair. Most successful. And a special word of thanks to Chairperson, Jane Chaney....for her countless labors of love...not just this week, but across the weeks of the late summer and fall. Made it fun for us all.

Some bargains remain...arrangements made be made today, but let's be careful about overdoing the sales on a Sunday...remembering this is our day of worship.

- F. As far back as I can remember, we have always received a special Thanksgiving offering....most of which goes out to help others beyond the walls of this church. Envelopes are in the pews. Our goal is \$ 1500.....a hundred people each giving us ten dollars would get us started down the road of reaching that goal...along with the five or ten additional one dollar gifts that come along....challenge you to be generous, remembering:

"To whom much is given, must also is expected!"

OFFERING

Jesus said:

"It is more blessed to give than it is to receive"  
And in this spirit let us worship God with our gifts - tithes, offerings and pledges of support for the year ahead.

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