

"FINDING OUR WAY TO THANKSGIVING"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
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INTRODUCTION

A little girl whose father was both a disc jockey and a radio announcer was invited to a friend's home for dinner. When she arrived, the mother asked the little girl if she would honor them by saying the blessing before the meal. The little girl was delighted. She cleared her throat and looked at her wristwatch and bowed her head and said,

"This food, friends, is coming to you this day through the courtesy of Almighty God!"

Well, she was right....for all food that we eat comes to us through the courtesy of Almighty God.

THANKSGIVING

Thanksgiving is a special time of the year. Some of us can already feel the great anticipation building in our society as we prepare for this special day. You may not be one of them for unfortunately, Thanksgiving is not that high on the priority list of many people. There are those who may be tempted to ask, "Just what do I have to be thankful for?" Granted, the Pilgrims had good reason to offer their thanks to God, but not in this "Dog-eat-dog" selfish and busy world.

Thanksgiving? "Come on, preacher...." they say, "get real". I remember last Thanksgiving that we were invited to share in a Wednesday evening Thanksgiving Eve service with our friends from the church around the corner. I went...shared in it and was lifted by it but was disappointed when only one other person from our church was moved to come. I think that for many of us...more and more....Thanksgiving just does not come naturally. It just doesn't seem obvious why we should be giving thanks or saying "thank you" to God.

Some of us, whether we admit it or not, are a bit like Bart Simpson who sat down with his family to a meal. And when it's his turn to offer a prayer of thanks, he says something to this effect:

"Lord...my dad earned the money to pay for this food, and my mom works for hours to cook it. What did you do? Thanks a lot for nothing!"

Bart Simpson is only a cartoon character, but he says what a lot of us are often tempted to think and even to say. To me that's sad. But that's the way many people today think and act...no feeling for real thanksgiving.

From time to time we come across some humorous stories of people, who in a moment of great crisis, make some extravagant promises to God....and then when the crisis has passed, they quickly reduce the level of their promise. It's a bit like the man in Asia that I read about who was caught in a terrible storm. He promised God a sacrifice of 20 oxen if he survived. Well, he survived and as the storm quieted, he thought to himself, "Why be so foolish as to give oxen...why not nuts instead?" On the way to offer the nuts, he became so hungry that he ate the nuts. He ended up offering the empty shells as his sacrifice. Empty lives and empty promises seem to go hand in hand. Some people do not feel anything on Thanksgiving Day. Thanks-giving is a foreign concept to them. Oxen to nuts to just a lot of empty shells and empty words.

"For the Lord, your God, is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks and water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; a land where you shall eat food without scarcity, in which you shall not lack anything; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the Lord, your God, for the good land which He has given you.

And beware lest you forget the Lord, your God, by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today; lest, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them, and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, then your heart becomes proud, and you forget the Lord, your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

We are called to remember...to pause long enough to think about what God has done for us. It's so easy for us to lose track of our blessings in the helter-skelter environment in which we find ourselves. How often we forget to give God thanks for our daily bread, for the hands that have prepared it, for the homes that shelter us as we take our daily bread. Yes, how often we forget that all we have is a gift from God. That little girl was on target when she said,

"This food, friends, is coming to you this day through the courtesy of Almighty God....."

I read about a man who went to his doctor complaining of pain in several places. The doctor asked him to indicate where it hurt. He pointed first to his leg, and then to his back, and then to his left side, finally to his head. "Every time I press on those places....oh, doctor...it really hurts." And after a careful examination the doctor diagnosed his problem. He said, "Friend....you have a broken finger!"

When we shows signs of being ungrateful, it is usually not our circumstances that are to blame. We're like the man with the broken finger focusing on his leg, his back, his side and his head when the problem lay in the appendage he was using to examine each of them. Ungrateful people, I've noted, are usually troubled in their hearts and souls. In other words, the problem so often is not outside, but there - on the inside. The cure is to pause and to remember what the Lord has done for us....to cultivate an attitude of gratitude!

SOME REFLECTION

As you know, the roots of Thanksgiving in this land go back to the year 1621 when some grateful Pilgrims up there in Plymouth, Massachusetts, paused to thank God for a modest harvest that pulled them through a very challenging time in their journey and their quest for religious freedom. Unlike Bart Simpson, they returned thanks to God...for they knew that without God's help they would never have survived.

I've always appreciated the words of Tom Wicker who once wrote in his column for the NY Times:

"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."

FOCUS ON GOD'S PRESENCE

Let me offer three suggestions on how we might find our way to Thanksgiving this year and to thankful living.

First of all, for real thanks-giving to take place in our lives, we need to focus a bit more than we do on the presence of God. They had it right back there in Deuteronomy when whoever it was who wrote it, said:

"When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the Lord, your God, for the good land which He has given you...."

Someone once said that "God has two dwellings...one in heaven and the other in a meek and a thankful heart." We can have that thankful heart when we take time to focus on God and what God has done for us.

Max Lucado, the writer, tells of a boy named Paul who grew up in West Texas where tornados have been known to touch down. He was only four years of age when one such tornado threatened their town and his home. At the first hint of trouble, his father hustled them inside...all of the children....laid them and their mother on the floor together, covering them with a mattress. His father explained they would be safe there, but as they waited out the tornado, Paul realized that his father was not there under the mattress with them and peeking out he discovered his father was standing at the window watching the funnel cloud turn and twist across the West Texas prairie. The four year old, Paul, crawled from under the mattress over to where his father was standing and he wrapped his arms around his father's leg. Years later, Paul recalled that day and remarked,

"Someone told me the safest place to stand in a storm was next to my Father....and that's where I stood....."

The Pilgrims of Massachusetts knew that, too....the safest place to stand in the storm was in the presence of God...for they knew that God was the source of their blessings and they kept their promises to God and gave Him their thanks. It kept their souls refreshed and full of joy and hope and faith. It was this same focus on God that inspired Paul to write in his letter to the Thessalonians,

"Pray continually...and give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ".

This same focus on God helped Jesus to give thanks even in His darkest hours, for we read in the Gospels:

"On the night in which He was betrayed....He broke bread and gave THANKS".

As we take the time to focus on God, we find we experience thanksgiving.

THE NEEDS OF OTHERS

Then, too...for Thanksgiving to take place, we also need to be aware of the needs of others.

Not everyone is as blessed and as fortunate this Thanksgiving season as you and I are. And if we truly are to experience the real joy of this season, then we need to remember the needy and less fortunate. Thanksgiving will not ring true if we don't make ourselves aware of the needs of others.

In a recent comic strip, a ten year old boy asks his father,

"Daddy....why do we always have turkey on Thanksgiving?" The father after a bit of hesitation, says...."Well, son....because it's a tradition!"

And the son then asks,

"Daddy....what's a tradition?" And his older fourteen year old brother says, "Something we 've been doing so long that we can't remember why we do it!"

And that's precisely the danger. The danger is that we will forget what Thanksgiving is all about.

When we stop to give thanks, hopefully we are reminded of our responsibility to others. And this is why so many people do open up their hearts at this time of the year and believe me - they do....to give to the homeless and to the families who do not have the bounty that most of us enjoy. Oh, to be sure, not everyone gets swept up in this wonderful spirit of giving. What's the expression...that cuts both ways:

"When it comes to giving, some people stop at nothing!"

That's a favorite of mine. Some Christians remind me of that humorous scene in the movie, Sister Act, in which the Reverend Mother is approached by a priest about keeping a show girl (played by Whoopie Goldberg) in the convent for safe keeping. Sensing her reluctance, the priest says to the Reverend Mother, "But you made a vow of hospitality to help the needy". And with that the Reverend Mother replies, "I lied!"

Thanksgiving ought to remind us of our interdependence with other persons and our need for one another. As John Donne once put it, "No man is an island". We share a common humanity and if there are those in need, it is our responsibility as followers of Jesus to see that their needs are met.

There was a very touching Thanksgiving Day editorial in the paper last year that told of a teacher who asked her first grade class of children to draw a picture of something they were thankful for. As she asked them to do this, she thought to herself of how little these children from poor neighborhoods actually had to be thankful for, but she knew that most of them would draw pictures of turkeys or tables with food and that was why she was taken back with the picture little Douglas handed in. It was a simply childishly drawn hand. But whose hand? The class was captivated by the abstract image and one child said,

"I think it must be the hand of God that brings us the food". Another child said, "A farmer's hand....because he grows the turkeys".

Finally, when the others were all at work, the teacher bent over Douglas's desk and quietly asked him whose hand it was. He mumbled and said, "It's your hand, teacher." At that moment she recalled that there had been those times at recess when she had taken Douglas - a somewhat scrubby and forlorn child by the hand. She often did that with the children, but it had meant so much to Douglas.

We tend to forget that the only hands that God has are our hands. And a hand stretched out in love to "one of the least of these...." is a hand that reflects a thankful heart. Maya Angelou said something that caught my attention, something very beautiful and meaningful. "Giving" she said...."liberates the soul of the believer". Let me repeat that. It is true that we don't help others that they might be saved, but that we might be saved from the greed and the insensitivity that captures the soul of the ungrateful.

YIELD OUR HEARTS TO GOD

And third, real Thanksgiving takes place when we yield our hearts and give ourselves to God.

To find our way to thanksgiving, first focus on God. Second, be willing to share with others...especially the needy. And yield your heart to God.

She was wearing a T-shirt that said, "What Is God Like".....And what it said in answer to that question was enough to move anyone to yield their heart to Him. It said,

God is like COKE...He's the real thing.
God is like PAN AM...He makes the going great.
God is like GENERAL ELECTRIC...He lights your path.
God is like BAYER ASPRIN....He works wonders.
God is like HALLMARK CARDS...He cares enough to send
the very best.
God is like TIDE...He gets stains out others leave
behind.
God is like VOS HAIR SPRAY...He holds through all kinds
of weather.
God is like SEARS...He has everything.
God is like ALKA SELTZER...try Him, you'll like Him.
God is like SCOTCH TAPE....you can't see Him, but you
know He's there.
God is like DIAL SOAP...aren't you glad you know Him?

DON'T YOU WISH EVERYONE DID?"

PRAYER

Help us to find our way to a real "thanks-giving", O God, and help us to cultivate an attitude of gratitude. Help us to focus our thoughts on You as the "giver of all"....and then move us to share with others some of what you have given us. Wrestle with us in the deep and hidden corners of our hearts where ingratitude so often lurks that we may be moved to yield our hearts to Your lifting and healing presence. In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray.

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And beware lest you forget the Lord, your God, by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today; lest, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them, and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, then your heart becomes proud, and you forget the Lord, your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

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"When it comes to give...some people stop at nothing!"

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"Giving liberates the soul of the believer....."

Let me repeat that. It is true that we don't help others that they might be saved, but that we might be saved from the greed and the insensitivity that captures the soul of the ungrateful. Thanksgiving takes place when, first, we focus on God and second, when we share with the needy. Third...briefly....and

YIELD OUR HEARTS TO GOD

Finally, real Thanksgiving takes place when we yield our hearts to God.

Finding our way to thanksgiving. Focus on God. Be willing to share with others, especially the needy. And yield your heart to God. A simple formula which will add much to our celebration of thanksgiving in coming days.

PRAYER