

## "ON BEING GRATEFUL FOR THE PRESENT"

### INTRODUCTION

The sermon today begins with the observation that there are many people who fail to appreciate the greatness of the time in which we live. Seldom do you hear some one exclaim, "What a wonderful time to be alive". It's more apt to be, "What a terrible time, a fearful time in which to live". I remember a few years ago when we were expecting our first child that a dear, elderly lady of this parish (no longer alive) one evening lectured my wife and me on why we were wrong to bring children into this bad, corrupt and evil world. And she told us that she hoped we would never make the mistake of bringing more children into the world. There is a kind of conspiracy in the hearts of many against the present. And then a day like next Thursday rolls into view and what is there to say. If our age is so bad, so corrupt, so hopeless - what is there now to be grateful for except the past and the glory that is gone.

Now I always like to give my sermons a Biblical text...

Long ago out on the plains of Midian there was a man by the name of Moses. Having killed an Egyptian taskmaster, he had found it necessary to escape into the wilderness to save his own life. For months he had been brooding on the oppression of his people, wondering why somebody didn't do something, as though the God of his fathers had been completely forgotten. Then one day amid the sagebrush and the sand there came this arresting message:

it gives people something to think about while you're preaching!

"Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground....."

In other words - this is your moment. This is your opportunity - not in the past - but now! Not in some far off place - but here! This - this place whereon thou standest, this is the holy ground. This is the significant moment.

And so today on this Sunday before Thanksgiving, when it is our national custom to pause to remember the past and be grateful for its contribution, I would like to approach it differently and ask you to remember the present and be grateful for its opportunity and its challenge. "This" said the psalmist, "This is the day which the Lord hath made. Let us be glad and rejoice in it".

stand on the shoulders of other

None of us stand alone - we all

DEVELOPMENT My purpose this morning is not to discount the past (we need it so much), but to puncture the false glorification of the past, that instead of bringing inspiration to the present so often becomes the down drag of the present - the enemy of the present. It's a curious trick of the mind that envelopes past history with a hale and glory it never really had and makes the days that are gone seem glamorous and glorious and God filled in comparison with the hard and difficult demands that confront us today. Memory has a way of playing tricks on us. Carlyle use to wonder about that - why the future looked so bright and the past so rosy. He suggested that it was because fear had been extracted from them. The future is so far away, you haven't come to its troubles yet, and the past is so far away, you have forgotten it. So that both, seen through the haze of distance, are illusions.

Perhaps you remember the book, How Green Was My Valley - the story of a man who looks back over his boyhood years; and while the story back there was one of poverty, struggle and heartbreak, he regards that period of his life - his boyhood, when the family was together, as the time when his valley was most green. Isn't it strange, when you're in the valley, you seldom realize it. The green is always some place else.

And remember that touching scene in Thornton Wilder's Our Town - Emily, the young bride who had died in childbirth was permitted to go back to her home in Grover's Corners and relive her 12th birthday. The experience was disillusioning. Everybody - he mother, father, sisters and brothers - seemed so busy, so pre-occupied, no time to

stop, to notice, to feel, to realize life and enjoy it while they were living it. "Oh mama" she cried, "Just look at me one minute as if you really saw me...just for a moment we're all together. Mama, just for a moment we're happy. Let's look at one another".

Some of you may have heard the story about the farmer who had been working the same farm for forty years and was getting a little tired of it. He decided to sell it for whatever he could get for it. And so he went to the nearest town for an auctioneer and asked him to put the place up for sale. The auctioneer came out to look the place over, took out his pencil and jotted down the various items dealing with the property and then went back to prepare for the big event.

The next morning the farmer went out to his mail box, took out a long envelope, opened it and found what was a printer's proof of an advertising poster announcing the forthcoming sale of the farm. The farmer read every word with a great deal of interest till he came to the last line and there he read his own name. His interest turned to bewildered curiosity. He rushed to the telephone, called the auctioneer and said, "Is that my farm?" "Why yes" replied the super-salesman. "Whose farm did you think it was?" The farmer gasped, "Don't sell that farm. Why I've been looking for a farm like that all of my life". Maybe some of us need to be auctioneers once in a while....and take stock of the many blessings that we do enjoy.

Somebody once wrote a biography of an American business man and summed up his life's story in this one sentence:

"He was boen in the countey where he worked like the dickens so he could move to the city where he worked like the dickens so he could move to the country".

It sound strangely familiar. We have a tendency to miss the finest things of life that are cñose by, by habitually looking elsewhere for them. When we're young, we think it will come when we're older. When we're older, we think it was back there when we were younger. When you're here, you think it was there. And then when you get there, you find that life has doubled back and it's quietly waiting for you in the very place you ran away from. And isn't it true that school days are something like that - we're always getting ready for the next step. We go to grade school to get ready for high school. Then we go to high school to get ready for college. In college, of course, we're busy getting ready for the profession we have chosen. Then we dig in to prepare for security and promotion. We'll be all set when the mortgage is paid, when the business gets going, when the furniture is all paid for, when the kids grow up and get on their own. Even then you better look out or some preacher is apt to come along and say to you, "Prepare to meet thy God". "This world is only preparation for the next".

"Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou now standest is holy ground...."

This is the holy ground - here and now. This is the moment, this is the hour.

#### GRATEFUL FOR THE PRESENT

This is why this morning I would like to bring Thanksgiving Day out of the past and move it a little more into the present....to urge you to be grateful for the present moment. After all, what is it that we admire about those great heroes of yesterday. It isn't because they lived in a good time, because they didn't. It isn't because they were super-human folk. They weren't. I think we admire them and pay tribute to them because in a time that was discouraging and difficult, they didn't give in to despair and discouragement. They took what they had in their hands and did something significant with it!

This is a part of the glory of Thanksgiving Day - in its historical significance. I think it is a mistake to idealize the Pilgrims and picture them as saints with halos around their heads. They weren't. But there is something powerful and unforgettable in what they did. Think of it - the first Thanksgiving Day held on this continent did not come out of prosperity and affluence. It came out of adversity and hardship. And in their time of adversity and hardship, they gave thanks to God. They didn't say, "Some day God will come and bless this land, and do great things for its people". They said, "He is here now." And looking back across the years we know how right they were. God was moving in their midst, using them to create something good, something different on the face of this earth. It must not have been easy for them to see God in their own time and under those hard circumstances. It is never easy to see God in one's own time. It's always easier to see him in some lovely, green valley of the past.

Some of you may question why we suggest this to be a great time, a great age for which to be thankful. It's not because things are lovely, serene and happy for all of God's children - for they are not. Our present age stands trembling between fear and prayerful hope. It stands wavering between complete chaos and new creative thrusts. The thing that's great about it is its possibility - its potential. - this unprecedented chance for forward movement, this chance to leave the low vaulted past, to serve as instruments in God's hand to make new, exciting possibilities come true. Our world is changing and changing rapidly. It is a time of turmoil, tension, revolution, and rapid social change and we are being given the opportunity to help make some changes for the good. "Man has come of age" said Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He is breaking with the past in many ways. And generations to come will look back on this time and examine what we have done. And whether they remember us with honor or with censure will depend on the response we make to the demands of this difficult time - whether we drive ahead with faith and confidence, making strong our position, and make this truly a meeting place with God who is the Father of all men. It is a difficult age - but it is exciting because of the possibilities and the potential it has.

I wish I could make this come home to us this Thanksgiving time - right down in our own personal lives - one by one - an appreciation of this moment, to be grateful for the present, the chance that God is giving us right now to do something significant, to build a better way of life for the people of this nation. I suppose we often fool ourselves in thinking that if things were different, we would be different. If a person cannot be thankful on this coming Thursday for what he has, he would certainly not have been thankful at Plymouth Rock. It's so easy to fool ourselves with the haze of distance.

WHAT IS IN YOUR HAND

We read in the Book of Exodus that on one occasion God said to Moses: "What is in your hand?" What is in your hand?

That is, what are you doing with the present moment? What are you doing with the present opportunity? - with the here and the now? What are you doing with what you have been given to help and to shape a better life for those yet to come? Are you willing to share something of what God has given you to help others.

There's a story that's been told about a young Scots minister who came from the highlands of Scotland to take a church in the city of Glasgow. It was his first assignment. He had never seen such slums. Back in the highlands, he had never known the city - the kind of poverty and filth that breed in the city. Oh how the problems of the city weighed heavily on his heart. Depressed, overburdened - he was ready to quit, to go somewhere else. He talked things over with another preacher - Dr. Thomas Chalmers - the great Scots preacher. One day Dr. Chalmers was walking across the bridge that spanned the river and noticed the young preacher standing on the bridge and looking out over the grimy city that sprawled beneath him. "Young man" said Chalmers, with one hand on the boy's shoulder and the other out over the city -

*out of darkness  
into light.*

"Young man - what a grand field of operation. Big problems with which to wrestle. And aren't you glad to be alive and here to have a go at them".

~~"Big problems with which to wrestle....." And it's good to be alive and here to have a go at them. I hope that this is the way you feel.~~ It is a great time to be alive. Let us be thankful for it - for this place - for the opportunity to have a personal share in lifting things up - improving things - the opportunity to take hold at some point and make things better. And who knows? Perhaps at some distant point, we shall look back and say of this place and of this moment:

"Surely the Lord was in this place and we knew it not.  
The place whereon thou standest is holy ground"

LET US PRAY:

O God, our Father, at this season of national thanksgiving, our hearts are deeply stirred with gratitude for the abundant way in which thou hast blessed us and the land in which we live. We give thee thanks, this hour, for the chance to be alive at this time, and we beseech thee that in our thanksgiving and in our praise, a measure of generosity and a measure of patience may be wrought in our hearts, with grace to do thy will and to carry out thy good works here on earth - in this city and in this church. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen