

"THANKFUL FOR THE RIGHT THINGS"

A Sermon By

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Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
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INTRODUCTION

Each of us has a list of different things for which we are thankful. A Sunday School teacher asked her class to make such a list. A little boy wrote down that he was thankful for his glasses. The teacher was impressed by that knowing that some young people resent wearing glasses. But here, obviously, was a young man mature enough to appreciate what wearing glasses did for him. She said to him,

"Johnny...I see that you put your glasses down at the head of things for which you are thankful this Thanksgiving. Is there any special reason connected with this."

And Johnny answered,

"Yes, ma'am. My glasses keep the boys from hitting me, and the girls from kissing me."

DEVELOPMENT

Each of us would have our own list of the things for which we are thankful. I think that most of us are mature enough in our faith to recognize that Thanksgiving is a dangerous holiday. For when we give thanks, for instance, for our good health, what is that saying to the person who does not have a well body? Does that say that we are more deserving than they, or that somehow God loves us more?

Or when we thank God for our nice homes or our families or our freedom as Americans, what does this say about good, decent God-loving people around the world who do not share these blessings. I have no ready answers for such questions and neither does anyone else. I would prefer, however, as we give thanks this coming Thursday and all the rest of the year that we do it for the right reasons.

Therefore, what are some of the things that every Christian, regardless of his or her circumstance, in every corner of the world can be thankful for this Thanksgiving season? Any suggestions?

In our lesson from Paul's Letter to the Colossians we can glean some solid suggestions. Paul prays that the Colossians, and indirectly that all of us, might be strengthened,

"With all power, according to His glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father"

St. Paul was trying to teach us all that we should be thankful in all circumstances of life. But what are the right things for which we ought to give thanks?

OUR INHERITANCE

The first thing for which we should be thankful, according to St. Paul, is our inheritance. He writes,

"....giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints..."

Now Paul was choosing his words very carefully. An inheritance is not an award for outstanding merit, is it? An inheritance is not pay for a job well

done. It is not something one earns or deserves or creates by his own devotion. An inheritance is a gift. It is a gift that is dependent on someone else's efforts. You may receive a large inheritance not because you are so smart or energetic, but because you had a grandfather who was. Or in some cases you had a grandfather who was never caught! (Anyway...)

Wasn't it Mark Twain who said he spent a large sum of money to trace his family tree and then spent twice as much trying to keep his ancestry a secret?

A little baby can come into a large inheritance simply by accident of birth. One of the consequences of the "new birth" in Christ Jesus is that we automatically, immediately at that moment become heirs of all that God has in store for His beloved children.

And that is a staggering fact that many of us who have been in the church all of our lives have difficulty taking in and accepting. There's a story that is going around that makes this point painfully clear. It seems that there was a believer who was not everything he ought to be and he knew it. He had his bad habits here on earth. In fact, when he finally passed from this life to the next one he was deeply concerned that St. Peter wouldn't let him through the Pearly Gates. When he got to his destination, however, there was Peter...waiting for him with open arms.

He asked St. Peter,

"Are you certain that you didn't make a mistake? You see, there are certain parts of my life of which I'm sort of ashamed...some dark corners, dark shadows...I'm not perfect"

St. Peter answered,

"No...we didn't make a mistake. You see, we don't keep any records."

The man was greatly relieved and overjoyed. But then he happened to see a group of men over in a corner beating their heads against a celestial wall and clinching their fists and stomping their feet in disgust. "What's the matter with them" the man asked St. Peter. "Oh" said Peter with a smile,

"They also thought we kept records...."

I'm not suggesting that what we do is unimportant...you know me well enough to know I'd never suggest that. Nevertheless at the top of our list for which we need to be thankful this day is that our salvation is the free gift of God. It is an inheritance that is bestowed upon us the moment we become children of God. Our God is a loving God. A forgiving God. Never forget that!

Father John Powell in his book, Unconditional Love, tells about an incident that took place when he was serving as a chaplain in Germany. A dear little sister, 87 years young, was assigned to care for his room. He says that every time he left the room, even for a moment, the good sister cleaned it. She would wax the floors, polish the furniture and so forth. On one occasion when he left the room for a short walk, he came back to find her on her knees putting a final sheen on her waxing job. He laughingly teased her, saying, "Sister...you work too much."

This dear, devoted little sister straightened up (though still kneeling) and looked at him with a seriousness that bordered on severity. She said firmly, "Heaven isn't cheap, you know". No, heaven isn't cheap. It cost Jesus His life. Eternal life, however, is part of our inheritance. He earned it. All we have to do is accept it. Receive it.

I'm sure it troubles some of us that no records are kept in heaven because we're afraid that a few scoundrels may just slip in ahead of us. I think we tend to forget that if heaven was based only on merit, each of us would be in some difficulty as well.

Think of it this way. Most of us here this morning had the privilege of being born in this country. It's nothing that we earned or deserved. We could just as easily have been born to a poor, starving family in some other part of the world. Freedom is part of our inheritance as children of this nation. Of course, the parallel is not exact. Most of us were born in this country. It was not something we chose. However, we must choose to accept the inheritance that Christ bestows upon us. That is the only requirement. We must accept it. It is free, but the choice is ours. That comes first!

THE INCARNATION

The second thing for which we need to be thankful is the Incarnation. St. Paul writes,

"He is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation...." A little farther he writes, "He is the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything He may be pre-eminent."

Of whom is St. Paul speaking. He is speaking of Jesus...of Bethlehem and later of Nazareth. He is speaking of the Risen Christ. Without the incarnation - God becoming flesh and reconciling the world unto Himself....without the incarnation, there would be no inheritance.

Many of you are undoubtedly familiar with the work of California-born zoologist, Dian Fossey, among the gorillas in Africa. It is hard to imagine that the mighty gorilla has become an endangered species, but thanks to senseless slaughter by poachers, it is true.

Dian Fossey left her home in California to live for 18 years among those fierce creatures studying them closely. Gradually the gorillas accepted her and trusted her. From 1967 to 1985 she carried on her work. In 1985 Dian Fossey was murdered still seeking to protect the gorillas among whom she had made her home. Remember Sigourney Weaver portraying her in the movies.

It is a long way from California to the jungles of Africa. It is much farther from the throne of God to a stable in Bethlehem. Yet Christ made that journey in our behalf.

They say that when Robert Louis Stevenson retired to the Samoan Islands for his health he became to the natives of that island a kind and generous friend. Stevenson was concerned that there was only a path leading from the harbor of the island over which his new friends must walk in order to bring provisions to the interior. With his own money and personal efforts, Stevenson had a good

road constructed for his people. In gratitude the Samoans called it, "The road of a loving heart.." We all know of another road of a loving heart, don't we?

A young boy came to a missionary's side and said, "I love you and I want you to have this". He pulled from a straw basket the most beautiful shell the missionary had ever seen. As she admired its beauty, she recognized it as a special shell only found on the far side of the island, a half day's walk from the village. When she confronted the boy with this, he smiled and said,

"Long walk...part of gift...for you!"

Crucial to everything that you and I believe as Christians is this truth, that God so loved the world that He made this long walk to come from where He was to where we are. When it was impossible for us to reach out to Him, He reached out to us. There may be differences among Christians on a host of other things. We may be divided by theologies, how we baptize people, how and who we allow around the Lord's Table and even which political party with which we feel most comfortable. But on one point we all agree: God became flesh and dwelt among us. "God was 'in Christ'...reconciling the world unto Himself". That is the incarnation and again we affirm - no incarnation, no inheritance. That is the second thing for which every Christian can give thanks. God became one of us in order to make us like Himself.

Do you see that there is no other way God could have done it? It was essential that the God of all creation take upon Himself the flesh and the frailty of humanity...the trials and temptations...and all that is involved.

INCLUSION IN THE FAMILY OF GOD

And finally, we are thankful for our inclusion in the family of God. God has reconciled all things unto Himself, says St. Paul, making peace by the blood of the cross of His Son.

John Haggai in his book, Lead On, tells about Dr. Claude H. Barlow, a missionary to China and one of the most revered foreigners to work in that land.

A strange disease for which Dr. Barlow knew no remedy was killing people. There was no research laboratory for this disease, so Dr. Barlow conducted his own research. He studied the disease, filling a notebook with his observations. He then procured a vial of disease germs and sailed for the United States. Before he arrived, he took the germs into his own body, then went to John Hopkins University Hospital in Baltimore to be observed.

Claude Barlow was very sick now. He allowed his old professors at Johns Hopkins to use him for experimentation. A cure was found, which a healthy Claude Barlow then took back to China with him. And his efforts saved countless lives.

When asked about the experience, Dr. Barlow replied,

"Anyone would have done the same thing. I just happened to **be** in the position of vantage and had the chance to **offer** my body".

CLOSING

I doubt that just anyone would have done that? Only a person with

a very special kind of love in his or her heart would make that kind of sacrifice. It is that very special kind of love proceeding from the very heart of God that holds this world together. I believe that without that love we are all orphans in a strange and hostile universe. But that love does exist! It exists in this Church, in this land, and it exists among people around this earth who have had an encounter "in depth" with this man from Nazareth.

I hope I have helped you take your mind off of the superficial reasons for celebrating Thanksgiving. Let's give thanks, but let's do it for the right reasons and from some real depth. Let's give thanks for our inheritance as children of God, and for the incarnation that makes our inheritance possible, and for our inclusion in the family of God - an inclusion made possible by one who took creation's longest walk - from the "throne of heaven" to a stable in Bethlehem and out to a lonely cross on a stark hill outside a city. Those are things for which all of us who call ourselves Christian can be truly and deeply thankful.

PRAYER

Now stir us, O God, with deep feelings of gratitude for our Biblical inheritance...the very gift of our redemption through Christ...in whom we have come to see life's highest hope as well as its deepest meaning. Stir us and move us to accept this gift as we join in singing, Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices. In His spirit we pray. Amen

GREETING TO THE CHILDREN: Sunday, November 24th, 1991
Thanksgiving Sunday

WELCOME We welcome the boys and girls of our Sunday School who have joined us down here this morning for a few moments.... before heading off to their Class Sessions elsewhere in our church building.

As we approach Thanksgiving, the presence of these young lives in our church - our most precious gifts - is but one more thing for which we are thankful! It's good to see you all and I understand that you're going to sing for us here today.

BAPTISM Before you do, however, we're going to pause and the Sacrament of Baptism. I remember the day and the Sunday morning when some of you were baptized. It was special and baptizing ROBERT KENNETH FREDERICK, JR. helps to make this day special for all of us.

Robert Kenneth Frederick, Jr. was born back in October...on a Monday...the 7th day of that month. His father is Robert Frederick and his mother, Elsa Mc Donald.

They are friends of Naureen James...and Nigel and Kendall both of whom were confirmed last June in one of our services. As a matter of fact,

A number of their friends are here today...to lend support to this occasion...and to undergird this new life...with much love and devoted concern. So let me invite Mr. and Mrs. Frederick and young Robert to join me...with ~~five~~ God parents at the baptismal font right now. Ruth McDonald, 7 Naureen James, Yvonne Hackett, Ruby Garvey, Claude Tait, Derek Ventour, and George Frederick...Robert's brother....

CHILDREN SINGING And now the boys and girls are going to sing for us...following their song they will depart from the sanctuary....sing hymn "We Gather Together To Ask the Lord's Blessing". Hymn number.....one verse....

Elsa McDonald is Godmother of NIGEL JAMES.
And was a bridesmaid at Naureen's wedding...
and her family and Naureen's family - both families
go back quite a ways...Our thanks to Naureen
(Nigel and Kendal) for introducing our church to them...

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, November 24, 1991

MEETING / VISITORS

- A. We greet the visitors in the congregation today...delighted to have you with us on this Sunday before THANKSGIVING...and hope that we shall have the opportunity....
- B. Be free in the sharing of your name with us. Fill out a visitor card or sign a guest book. Come, worship with us on other Sundays. Come, work with us.... Roots are deep in the soil....doing the
- C. We minister in the name of Christ.... and it is in His loving spirit that we greet all of you today. Members: be sure to wear your name tags and make some new friends in the time we're together.
- D. Remember: today's coffee hour will be on the THIRD FLOOR...up in Fellowship Hall. Take the elevator, or if you feel strong, walk the three flights...

PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns are listed for you in the bulletin, noting that the "Hounds" will be meeting on Tuesday evening....that the Aldersgate Class will not be meeting - due to Thanksgiving. And that the Administrative Council will meet on Tuesday, the 3rd of December. And that the office will be closed both Thursday and Friday of this coming week.
- B. New members will be received into the Church on December 8th - two weeks from today. Already we have about 15 to 20 people who are interested in joining the Church. There may be others. Be in touch with me if you are tempted by the idea of membership in this Church. "If your heart is as my heart is, then give me your hand". Words of Wesley that I like to quote.
- C. Our Financial Canvass is well under way with 145 pledges gratefully received, totalling 120,000. We'd like to be up to 175 pledges by a week from today...and hopefully up to 160 by noon today. So help us if you can...with a pledge of financial support for 1992.

CHURCH FAIR

- A. To all who worked on yesterday's Church Fair to make it so successful - "THANK YOU". A special word of thanks to Al and Grace Thomas who gave so much of themselves to make it so successful. We thank you. Bargains remain...special arrangements. Remember: pecans. Christmas cards.

(over)

OFFERING / THANKSGIVING APPEAL

- A. There's an envelope in the pews for a special Thanksgiving gift to the Church...to help us meet our opportunities for helping others outside our church family...in the spirit of Thanksgiving.
- B. As far back as I can remember, we have always received a special offering....most of it goes to help others beyond the walls of this church....envelopes are in the pews...our goal is \$1500.00 and that means that fifteen dollars from 100 people - members and friends - would enable us to reach that goal. \$20.00 from 100 or more would be even better!
- C. Be generous as the ushers now wait upon you....remembering the words of Jesus "That is more blessed to give than to receive"....and the words of Paul, "That the Lord loveth a cheerful giver".

PASTORAL CONCERNS

- A. I would share with you the death of TSELANG RAMOTHIBE...a member of our Church from South Africa....who has been living in Mamaroneck, NY....Following a illness that stretched back to June, Tseleng passed away on Friday evening. A Memorial Service...Funeral Service will be held here on Saturday, Nov. 30th, at 2 pm.....Tseleng had been a member here since the early nineteen-eighties....jo ning the Church in 1984....
- B. Let us hold in our prayers Lena and Der Scutt...members of our church....for many years...Len's mother, Anna Martta Liukkonen died in her native Finaldn on November 21st...
- C. Let us also hold Charlotte Jucher in our prayers....whose sister, Elfreida Barrett passed away on Friday evening. Middletown, NY
- D. And let us all wish Clelus Van Raalte a happy birthday...she celebrates today...hopefully we'll have the pleasure of her company downstairs...may need a little help getting godwn there... but Clelus if you come, w 'll sing you Happy Birthday and have a special treat for you!

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PASTORAL PRAYER: November 24, 1991

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 in which we live.

To the sights and the sounds of nature.

To the presence of those who surround us.

To the mysteries of life that we cannot fully comprehend.

To the simple joys that daily we can experience.

THEN WE CAN BECOME THANKFUL -

That we are alive.

That we can see, and 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 here with us now - in our worship, in our fellowship,
in our service to others.

For music and singing that lift us,

For rest and leisure that refresh us,

For laughter and joy that renew us,

For those who understand us and help us to keep with it.

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

NOW TAKE US FROM OUR WORSHIP into the city where we can turn our words of thanksgiving into deeds of loving service for others.

KEEP US ALWAYS...close to the side of Christ, mindful of His values and always dependent on His Spirit.

For we would live, even as we pray, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

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