

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Thanksgiving Sunday
October 11, 2020
Rev. Mark McLennan

“Before it was a noun, Thanksgiving was a verb”

Scriptures:

Deuteronomy 8:7–18 Psalm 65
2 Corinthians 9:6–15 Luke 17:11–19

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Steve Kelsey:

Before it was a noun, thanksgiving was a verb.

The difference matters.

A desert father once said:

*If you have a chest full of oranges, and leave it for a long time,
the fruit will rot inside of it.*

It is the same with the thoughts in our heart.

*If we do not carry them out by physical action,
after a while they will spoil and turn bad.*

Living thankfully is not essentially about feeling thankful, or even being thankful.

To live thankfully is to act differently day by day because we are compelled by the Spirit to participate in the generous life of God-with-us, constantly practicing thanks-giving.

Thanksgiving is well established as a cultural institution in our country.

We know it as a day to observe, a milestone in the year:

- the inauguration of the holiday season,
- we are told a high holy day for retailers,
- a bellwether of our national economic health.

It is a time for families and wider communities to gather;

- a day for starting to write up our holiday shopping lists;
- for watching football;
- for eating, eating, and eating.

And for many, it is a time when attention is given to those who live in deep need throughout the year.

Have a good Thanksgiving, we say to one another beforehand.

And afterward, we ask,

How was your Thanksgiving? - assuming the word to be a noun.

But as a verb, as a spiritual practice, what is thanksgiving all about?

Giving thanks is actually central to the practice of Christianity.

It is a golden thread, woven through and uniting all we do as Christians.

At Thanksgiving, we celebrate the gift of the harvest.
We do so actively.

As Charles Winters put it in his wonderful prayer, which is offered by many just before the Great Thanksgiving in celebrations of the Eucharist:

*We make, O Lord, our glorious exchanges.
What you have given us, we now offer you,
that in turn, we may receive yourself.*

To harvest is itself an act of faith, of confidence in God's continuing providence.

When it has been a good year, it is evident that God is providing for us in abundance.

But the very act of cutting down the stalk and gathering in the crop from the field, leaves the field barren.

To harvest is an active response to all that God has given us, without which what has been given will rot and be ruined of no benefit to anyone.

In harvesting, we give thanks by stepping forward to collect what God has provided and using it to provide for our needs and those of others, trusting that in the cycle of nature, more will be provided in the next growing season.

There is an ancient, Biblical tradition in harvesting, of farmers not reaping all the way to the edges of a field so as to leave some for the poor and for strangers.

Part of the joy of the harvest is found in encouraging the gleaning of that part of the crop by others.

So, the practice of giving thanks at harvest time is connected with participating in the generosity of God, who provides the harvest.

The harvest is only possible when we join with God in the dance of abundance.

We are thus acting as stewards of God's bounty taking charge, taking responsibility for that which we do not own, for another's property (God's property, strictly speaking).

In so doing, we find ourselves giving thanks by sharing generously of the gifts we ourselves have received.

That is the Christian practice of stewardship.

It is a common practice at Thanksgiving for congregations and other community groups

- to gather food for food shelves,
- or assist at soup kitchens,
- perhaps offering Thanksgiving dinner to those who are hungry or alone at this special time.

It's an admirable tradition.

For some, unfortunately, this is motivated by a sense of guilt, that we have so much and are feasting so excessively maybe if we remember those who have less than us, it will salve our consciences to some extent.

But as a Christian spiritual practice, we understand this work of feeding others to be a natural consequence of participating in the dance of abundance with God.

Compassion and acts of charity flow naturally as a way of giving thanks to God; for in that action, we receive so very much.

The blessing flows both ways in that exchange.

Practicing compassion and seeking to give ourselves away is a form of prayer.

It is an activity that lies at the heart of all spiritual traditions, and therefore naturally catches the imagination of our neighbors in every community.

Thanksgiving, then, is not primarily about feeling thankful.

In many homes, before the turkey is carved, people take turns sharing what they feel thankful for that year.

This is a nice custom.

But as practicing Christians, we are called to move beyond feeling thankful; we are called to give thanks by taking very specific spiritual actions:

We practice hospitality.
We practice generosity.
We practice stewardship.
We practice compassion.

Giving thanks is a verb, a spiritual practice that runs like a golden thread through all we do and all we are as Christians.

Perhaps it helps to set one day aside in the year when we have the attention of everyone around the nation, to rehearse the importance of being thankful.

But we are even more effective as evangelists when we use Thanksgiving to act thankfully, with God, the God of abundance, who in this harvest festival, as in every day, rejoices to invite us to join in returning the gifts we have received, to God's honor and glory and purpose.

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, THE SAVIOUR, THE SPIRIT...AMEN

Responsive Call to Worship

One: Give thanks to the Lord, for God is good;

All: God's steadfast love endures for ever.

One: God crowns the year with bounty;

All: Pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy.

One: Valleys deck themselves with grain;

All: they shout and sing together for joy.

One: Who can utter the mighty doings of the Lord or declare all God's praise?

All: Let us praise God together for all God's goodness to us.

Prayer of Approach

Generous God of love, we gather in community to praise and thank you for the harvest of our orchards and vineyards.

Out of the sharp cold of winter, through blossom and fruiting, has come the plentiful harvest of today.

From winter trees, pruned and leafless, has emerged a rich crop upon every branch, swollen by the warmth of spring and summer.

Your boundless generosity, O God, is like the overflowing of baskets and bins.

Here is variety and volume beyond measure, like your immense love.

May we be moved to give back to you a portion of what you have gifted us, from the richness of your community and the wealth of your creation, for the sake of the gospel and to your glory, our Life-giver and Sustainer.

Generous and loving God, we confess that in a world where many do not have enough, we enjoy more than we need.

In a world where many live in fear, we take peace for granted.

In a world where many have lost hope, we become indifferent to despair and grumble about small things.

Forgive us, merciful God, and transform our lives to shine with the generosity, peace and hope you offer us in Christ Jesus. AMEN

Assurance of Pardon

Friends, while it is true we have all sinned, it is a greater truth that we are forgiven through God's love in Jesus Christ.

To all who humbly seek the mercy of God I say,
in Jesus Christ, our sin is forgiven.

Be at peace with God, with yourself and with one another.

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We give you thanks, O God, for all things that make life good, and pray that all people will share in the blessings we know.

For the world, for the wonders of earth, sea, and sky; for beauty in nature and wildlife; for the rhythm of the days and seasons; we give you thanks, O God, and ask that all people share such blessings.

For waters that refresh and sustain life; for soil that is fertile and rich; for those who tend crops and care for harvests; for those who produce, deliver and market our food and especially for those working tirelessly during the pandemic; we give you thanks, O God, and ask that all people share such blessings.

For days to work and strength to do it; for the many different gifts and talents you have given us; for challenges met, especially during months of pandemic relief; and for moments of leisure and rest when you restore us; we give you thanks, O God, and ask that all people share such blessings.

For human life; for talking and thinking together, working on problems and plans; for burdens and joys shared; for relationships that give life meaning, whether enjoyed face to face or at a distance; we give you thanks, O God, and ask that all people share such blessings.

For our circle of family and friends; for children and their curiosity and joy; for the insight that comes with patience and experience; and for events shared and memories cherished; we give you thanks, O God, and ask that all people share such blessings.

For your care and grace in times of anxiety, doubt and grief; for healing in times of illness, confusion, and distress; for rejuvenating strength and vision in times of renewal; for scientific knowledge and discovery to confront disease and improve health; we give you thanks, O God, and ask that all people share such blessings.

*PRAYER LIST: family of Walter Boam, Ruth Evans, Anne Milling, Bob Baron,
Laura Summers,
Our community, our country, and our world in the face of pandemic*

For the trust we have that you hear each prayer and know every need; that you love and care for each soul and body; and that you walk with us through all our days and seasons; we give you thanks, O God, and ask that all people share such blessings.

Now we turn to you, O God, with the words Jesus taught all his followers to pray, saying...

The Lord's Prayer

*Our Father in Heaven, Hallowed be your name, Your kingdom come,
Your will be done, On earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins As we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial And deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, Now and forever. Amen.*

ANNOUNCEMENT

Women's Council has organized a Preserve and Baking Marketplace.

A list of the products available for sale will be found in the Connection which you will receive by email this week and which will be on our website.

You will order the products that you would like to buy and will pick them up on Saturday, October 24.

These are the same delicious products that you would have been able to buy if we had a Bazaar this year.

Women's Council thanks you for your support.

STEWARDSHIP THOUGHT

Oscar Wilde, Author

"Our mission is not merely to alleviate poverty; it is to create a society in which poverty cannot exist."

BENEDICTION

May you always walk gently upon the Earth, in right relationship, nurtured by God's love,
open to the wind of the Spirit, taking only what you need,
always open to the needs of others, making choices that bring wellbeing,
living with generosity, striving for justice,
honouring all with reverence, reconciling and peacemaking,
recognizing your proper place as part of your creation.

May you receive strength and courage – from Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer for such a radical transformation into your Kingdom.