



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“Nothing Like Being Thankful!”

1 Chronicles 16:1-36; Luke 10:1-24, 18:9-14; Colossians 1:3-14

Our national day of Thanksgiving comes on Thursday—it also happens to fall on my brother’s birthday this year, so I have to get a card off to him early. This is his first Thanksgiving as a single man in many years, and I hope he is getting together with friends who invited him to their table—a good hint for you to apply when YOU think about your Thanksgiving plans, too.

In a Dennis the Menace cartoon, Dennis and Joey are staring longingly into a department store window that was all decorated for Christmas. The tree with a train going around it, toys galore, lights and live action characters have completely captured the two little boys. In a thoughtful and wistful voice Dennis says: "This week is our giving thanks holiday, an' Christmas is God's 'You're welcome'."

One of the benefits of a Thanksgiving Day each year is that it’s a built-in opportunity to stop for a while and count our blessings. The first Thanksgiving in New England was celebrated in Plymouth less than a year after the Plymouth colonists had settled in America. The first dreadful winter in Massachusetts had killed about half the members of the colony. But new hope arose in the summer of 1621. The settlers expected a good corn harvest, despite poor crops of peas, wheat, and barley. Thus, in early autumn, governor William Bradford arranged a harvest festival to give thanks to God for the progress the colony had made.

The festival lasted three days. The men of Plymouth had shot ducks, geese, and turkeys. The menu also included clams, eel and other fish, wild plums and leeks, corn bread, and watercress. The women of the settlement supervised cooking over outdoor fires. About 90 Indians also attended the festival. They brought five deer to add to the feast. Everyone ate outdoors at large tables and enjoyed games and a military review. Similar harvest Thanksgivings were held in Plymouth during the next several years, but no traditional date was set.

The custom of Thanksgiving Day spread from Plymouth to other New England colonies. During the Revolutionary War, eight special days of thanks were observed for victories and for being saved from dangers. In 1789, President George Washington issued a general proclamation naming November 26 a day of national thanksgiving. In the same year, the Protestant Episcopal Church announced that the first Thursday in November would be a regular yearly day for giving thanks.

Sarah Josepha Hale, the editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, worked many years to promote the idea of a national Thanksgiving Day. Then President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the last Thursday in November 1863, as "a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father." Each year afterward, for 75 years, each President formally proclaimed that Thanksgiving Day should be celebrated on the last Thursday of November. Congress ruled that after 1941 the

fourth Thursday of November would be observed as Thanksgiving Day and would be a legal federal holiday. (World Book Encyclopedia, CD-ROM edition) Now you know.

A kindergarten teacher was telling her students all about the Pilgrims as she prepared them for the Thanksgiving season. A mother of one student came by the school the next day to tell the teacher about the impact she had made on her little girl. After the little girl had shared the details she remembered from her teacher's lesson, her mother asked if she could tell her what the Pilgrims ate during that first Thanksgiving. The little girl was stumped so she said, "I can't remember, mommy, but you can ask my teacher - she was there!"

I have a lot to be grateful for, this Thanksgiving. I am grateful I was not called up for jury duty, after I got my notice to phone in each evening. Now I still have a shot at the December deadline for my doctoral proposal.

I am grateful for a lot of people in my life. This week, I got a formal letter inviting me, because of my internship at St. Peter's By-The-Sea Presbyterian Church near Los Angeles, to attend their 50th anniversary, with Sharon. They are grateful for me--and I am grateful for them, because they were the ones whom God used to move me into full-time ministry.

I am grateful for a lot of people in my life. This week, I got a custom-made card from the God's Good Timers Life Group, with warm messages of appreciation written by each of the members. I am grateful for them, too.

This is one kind of thanksgiving we'll explore in God's Word today. Open your Bibles, please, to Paul's letter to the Colossians. That's more than half-way through the New Testament, amidst those little letters—Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians. I have a friend who taught me his memory trick for these books, using the first letter of each—"General Electric Power Company"—Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians. Find Colossians, chapter 1, and listen with me for God's Word TO US TODAY, with this example of thanksgiving. [*text Colossians 1:3-14*]

You can hear the warmth of Paul's connection with these people. Notice, in verse 7, that Paul was not the one who came there and led them to Jesus as Savior and Lord. It was Paul's trainee, his disciple Epaphras, whom God's Spirit used to start new life there. And Paul is no less grateful. That's because, it was all about Jesus, for Paul. And that's the same for any true disciple of Jesus today.

Around our Thanksgiving tables, we could invite each person to tell something they are grateful for. And for most of us, that will be easy enough. Often our guest will talk about results in people they love—as Paul did with the Colossians. Other guests might talk about a specific event, and this example from Chronicles is one of those. Find First Chronicles 16 in your Bibles.. I think the context will be clear as I read, so I don't need to sketch it in. Listen again for the Word of God in these words from First Chronicles 16:1-36. [*text*]

David brought the Ark of God—you remember, the big box that carried the tablets with the Commandments given to Moses, and other special tools for life God had given the Israelites when they were "on the road" to the Promised land—David brought it to Jerusalem, after God had used him to conquer the place, and it would become the capital city of a unified nation, now entering its "golden age". No longer would the Ark have to be carried here and there, hidden

from enemies, exposed to great risk. Jerusalem, up in the hills, was going to be a fortified city, much more secure. Bringing the Ark there gave the Ark a place. And bringing the Ark to Jerusalem--a place that had not belonged previously to any one Israelite tribe before—also brought the people together. This was the new capital, and the Ark was the symbol and center of the very presence of God. No wonder David was delirious with delight—it was the most fulfilling moment of his life! He was really “king”, now! God had done a mighty work. The nation would always look on this moment with fondness--and he had gotten to be in the center of it! This surely was David’s Thanksgiving Day!

We can be thankful for the growth and success of other people we love, we can be grateful for victories in events of the past year. And we can be grateful for moments of life that bring us close to the very presence of God. Here is the opening part of Luke’s gospel, where we read about the birth of John the Baptizer. Find Luke, chapter 1. I’ll skip the opening verses where Luke addresses his book to a patron named “Theophilus”, and go straight to his first narrative in verse 5. Listen for God’s Word. [*Luke 1:5-24*]

When something so full of God occurs, you know it is but the start of much more God will be doing. Coming at the beginning of Luke’s gospel, we readers become more alert to God showing up, and it happens virtually in every paragraph in Luke’s account.

Now I want to look at another kind of Thanksgiving, and this text is also from Luke. Find chapter 18, and verses 9-14. This is deep into Jesus’ teaching ministry, a story he used to make a point about integrity in thanksgiving before God. Listen with me again for God’s speaking to us this morning. [*text*]

The Pharisee was extremely religious. He was officiously observant. And it was “a glorious adventure in missing the point,” as a current author says it. The Pharisee gives thanks that he is not corrupt and lax, “like some other people he could name.” Jesus says, this is thanks that stinks in the nostrils of God. The tax collector, on the other hand, knows he has no claim on God. He does not deserve anything great from God. He only asks for mercy. This is not false humility; it is the real thing, because Jewish tax collectors working for the occupying Romans had plenty to be humble about. But Jesus is clear—thanksgiving can be corrupt. Bragging before God—you’re in trouble; you’re really just talking to yourself, because God is not listening. But telling the truth about yourself to God—then God is “all ears”.

This is a more gritty kind of Thanksgiving, isn’t it? And what about giving thanks when things are going badly? Now, there’s a test. Many people, these days, have reason to make Thursday “Complaining Day” instead of “Thanksgiving Day”. A number of parades and events have been cancelled across the country, because of cost. Gasoline prices may be down, but many people have lost jobs, so there’s nothing to celebrate there. And with the Stock Market’s fall by some 33%, people who depend on their savings and investments to put food on the table are finding little to give thanks for, on November 27th. How do you give thanks when there’s so little to naturally lift up to God?

Two men were walking through a field one day, and they spotted an enraged bull in the same field. Instantly, they darted toward the nearest fence. The storming bull followed in hot pursuit, and it was soon apparent they would not make it. Terrified, the one shouted to the other: "Put up a prayer, John. We're in for it!" John answered, "I can't. I've never made a public prayer in my life." "But you must!" implored his companion. "The bull is catching up to us."

"All right," panted John, "I'll say the only prayer I know, the one my father used to repeat at the table: "O Lord, for what we are about to receive, make us truly thankful."

In a shopping mall one day, a researcher asked a mother, struggling with three young boys, "If you had it all to do over again, would you have children again? A mother replied, "Yes, but not the same ones."

Paul said, in First Thessalonians 5, "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thess. 5:16-18, NIV) How do we do that, genuinely?

It's natural for us to evaluate events by our view in the present moment. When a mother is giving birth, let's face it—it's an ordeal. Drugs can be "your best friends" if the pain gets awful, and it often does. But when the baby cries out, when the ordeal is nearly over, the mother can hardly wait to hold this miracle of flesh that is a wonder she has carried and nurtured for lo, these many months. In the middle of "labor", how easy is it to give thanks? Not at all. But the labor is for the purpose of something wonder-full that is to come.

What ordeals you and I may be going through—what is the purpose for those that we cannot now see, or find it hard to appreciate even if we know they are coming? When we are under stress, we seem to be hard-wired to focus in on the difficulty, as if we snap on blinders that screen out anything but the threat now upon us. In such times, it becomes all about us and our pain.

In the midst of such worry and stress, do we trust God? How easy—as "natural men and women"—to screen out God!

We can help each other here. In our Life Groups, or with our Deacon's help, we can invite God into our difficult days. Simply asking each other, "Where is God in this?" opens our blinders to admit another "character" onto the stage. And we can address this character! We can express our gratitude for things God has given us in the past, and express our trust that—in a way we cannot now see—that God is working even in this current difficulty for a larger purpose. Romans 8:28 IS true--". . . in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." ALL things.

If we believe that, if we trust God, then one thing we can do is to imagine some of the good that God might be bringing out of this. But remember--sometimes that means the "good" that is being created is one that will benefit someone else, and not us. The three most important verses in the Bible are in Genesis 12, 1-3: We are blessed *in order to be a blessing to others*.

And when we manage to give thanks in all circumstances, something changes in us. Our gloom begins to lift. Our hope begins to rise. The blinders that focus so exclusively on our pain and worry begin to fall off, and we see a much bigger and better world. Indeed, our difficulties start making us better, not bitter—and that in itself is a blessing, to us and to others.

There is nothing like Thanksgiving, on whatever day it comes. There is nothing like Thanksgiving, in whatever form it takes. There is nothing like Thanksgiving, for easy--or tough-times.

Make this Thursday a happy Thanks-giving, O my friends in Christ!

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California
on November 23, 2008, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]