

“Thanks and Giving”

Deut. 26:1-11, Psalm 100, John 6:25-35

Thanksgiving Joint Service – November 21, 2004 – 4:00 PM
Fairlington United Methodist & Fairlington Presbyterian Churches
Sermon by Jan Edmiston

There is an old story about Calvin Coolidge that illustrates his reputation as a man of few words. He was coming home from church and his father asked him:

“What was the sermon about today?”

“Sin,” Calvin said.

“And what did the preacher say about sin?”

“He was against it.”

We don’t think of Thanksgiving as having much to do with sin.

No, Thanksgiving is about turkey and cranberries, pilgrims and Native Americans. But sin? Not on the forefront of our brains this week.

The Kite Runner is a bestselling book about a boy named Amir, growing up Afghanistan. Amir’s father has very different ideas about sin from, say, the Taliban. For Amir’s father, “there is only one sin. And that is theft. Every other sin is a variation of theft.”¹

“When you kill a man, you steal a life. When you tell a lie, you steal someone’s right to the truth. When you cheat, you steal the right to fairness.”² This is how Amir’s father explained it.

<p>So what would the sin be if we were not grateful to God for all the blessings of this life? If we are not thankful, does it mean we are stealing something from God, the Giver of all gifts?</p>

Some families have the tradition of each person around the table expressing – verbally – something for which he or she is thankful, from the youngest to the oldest. This helps us acknowledge *verbally* that we have been blessed.

We did this in my family one year and it wasn’t exactly the stirring spiritual experience we’d imagined. My grandmother started off saying that she was thankful to be so rich – rich with family around her and the good health to enjoy this great meal (which she had prepared). My father – easily filled with emotion – simply squeezed my mother’s hand with tears in his eyes and mumbled something that we couldn’t understand

¹ Hosseini, Khaled. *The Kite Runner*. (Riverhead Books: New York), 2003. page 17.

² *Ibid.* page 18.

but nobody wanted to press him on it. My mother then suddenly remembered that the gravy was still on the stove and she hopped up to run back to the kitchen.

My brother then expressed that he was thankful that he'd recently learned the Heimlich Maneuver, so in case anybody choked it wouldn't be a problem. My grandfather, who couldn't hear very well and couldn't figure out what was going on, said, "Well *I'm* going to start eating before this food gets cold."

The truth is that all of us were thankful – sure – but we weren't so sure how to express it. How do we express thanksgiving to *God*?

A simple: *thank you God for this meal, for this hour, for our very lives* is not so hard to express. But our tradition as **people of faith** also involves a second step: giving. One without the other is a rather weak response. Some might even call it a sin. **Thanks** without **giving** is incomplete.

Thanks and **giving** were so crucial to the faith of the children of Israel, that they were given instructions on how to do it long before they actually reached the Promised Land. "When you come to the Promised Land," Moses said – they weren't there yet – "take some of the first fruits from the ground, put them in a basket, go to the place where God's name dwells, and then give that basket to the priest remembering all that God has done for you – from placing you in the family of a wandering Aramean to freeing you from your oppressors in Egypt to bringing you to this new, fertile place." **Thanks** and **giving**.

The day after The Feeding of the 5000, according to John's gospel, the crowds found Jesus on the far side of the Sea of Galilee. They had been searching for him, and why not? He had just done the miraculous: fed 5000 people with just two fish and five loaves of barley bread. But they were searching for Jesus for all the wrong reasons. Did they simply want to see this trick again? Were they simply hungry and wanted to fill their stomachs one more time?

Jesus reminded them that filling their souls was the priority and the way to fill their souls was to *recognize what God had given them*. It was *God* who sent him to them. It was *God* who had dropped manna from heaven long ago (not Moses.) If they were thankful for this, then their faithful response was to **believe** in God's Son. Believe in Jesus.

This morning over at Fairlington Presbyterian, we heard these words of Paul: *by grace you have been saved.*³

³ Ephesians 2:5

We all know people who spend their lives doing good deeds. They are the ones who come early and stay late at events like this. They collect canned goods for A.L.I.V.E. They volunteer at shelters and soup kitchens. They run the PTA. They shelter homeless animals. They take the Scouts camping and the Seniors to their doctor appointments. These are all worthy ways to spend our time. But we are not saved by any of these activities.

We are saved by the grace of God. The Israelites were not about to receive the Promised Land because they were exquisitely deserving of this gift.⁴ In fact, they didn't deserve it at all. They were stubborn. They were control-freaks. They worshipped their possessions more than they worshipped God. (Sound familiar?)

But God was good then. And God is good now.

We don't deserve what we have either, but God is good and is deserving of our thanks and praise. And after we have given thanks to God, our faithful response is *to give*.

Our good deeds do not save us; they are simply our response to the goodness of God. **Thanks and giving. Thanks and giving.**

Which brings me back to sin.

I love the practice of confession in the Roman Catholic tradition. Remember, it is a two-step process. The first is to express **verbally** that we are sorry for what we've done. But then there is a second step: to express with our hands, our feet, our wallets, our calendars that we are sorry. It's called *penance*. Penance is a response that brings something positive out of our devotion to God. **First, we acknowledge our sin. Then we do something to move the world a little closer to God's great vision of what the world might be.**

If I'm sorry for cheating on a test, then my penance might be to tutor a child who needs help.

If I'm sorry for losing my temper with my neighbor, then my penance might be to spend time helping her do something she cannot do herself.

If we are thankful for something, there is also a 2-step process, according to scripture.

First we acknowledge the gift verbally. We make a joyful noise.

Then, we express with our hands, our feet, our wallets, our calendars that we are thankful. **First**, we acknowledge our gratitude. **Then** we move the world a little closer to God's great vision of what the world might be.

⁴ See Deuteronomy 9:6ff.

Thanks and giving. Thanks and giving.

This Thursday, if we are very fortunate, there will be bread – corn bread, bread pudding, whole wheat rolls, Grandma’s biscuits. The options are countless. When you break bread this Thursday, after it has been blessed, **remember.**

Remember that Christians, Jews, and Muslims all consider ourselves the descendants of a wandering Aramean. Remember that Jesus Christ is the bread of life. And remember that Thanksgiving is a two-step process:

May we express our thanks with our *lips*.

Then *give* thanks with our hands and feet and wallets and calendars, with our arms and legs and minds and energy . . . to the glory of God who by grace showers us with innumerable gifts. **To neglect to thank God might just be thievery.**

Let us pray:

With joyful noise with thank you LORD in our praying and singing. We are your people. We belong to you. And with all we are and with all we have we thank you, in the name of Jesus Christ our Savior, our Redeemer, our Bread. Amen.