

Rejoice and Give Thanks

Philippians 4:4-14

Rev. Todd B. Freeman

College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa November 22, 2009

Last year at this time I shared the rather disturbingly true story of the Puritan's real relationship with the Native Americans in the Plymouth area of what is now Massachusetts. Unlike the story most of us were taught in school, the real intentions of those immigrants from England weren't ones of mutual friendship and cooperation – but of domination and eventual conquest of the indigenous Native American population. And though that knowledge puts a damper on our *traditional* understanding of that First Thanksgiving in 1621, I am among those that believe that ultimately it should not negate the importance of our taking time to reflect upon all that we have to be thankful for.

It was actually President Abraham Lincoln who first proclaimed it a national holiday, a day of Thanksgiving, in 1863. In a special address, using surprisingly religious language, and unfortunately not giving an honest assessment of the genocidal efforts used to take the land we now call the United States of America, Lincoln nonetheless announced:

We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven... But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserves us... and we have vainly imagined... that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us.

These words ring amazingly true today, 146 years later.

As people of faith, this holiday of Thanksgiving should be a time of intentional reflection upon just how much we are and have been blessed by God, how much we are and have been the recipients of God's grace – even when times may have been hard. **The act of giving thanks, in fact, should be near the top of our list of spiritual practices.**

Several years ago Dr. Nick Stinnett of the University of Nebraska conducted a group of studies called the "Family Strengths Research Project." Stinnett and his researchers identified six qualities that make for strong families or strong relationships.

The research found that **one of the most important elements present in strong relationships is the quality of appreciation – of being thankful, of expressing gratitude.** Families, whether biological or chosen, are strong, in part, because family members express to each other their appreciation for what the other members DO and simply for who they ARE.

In case you're interested, the study was published as a 1986 book entitled, **Secrets of Strong Families**. The entire list of the six qualities the pinpointed as contributors to strong families and relationships include:

- **Appreciation**
- **Commitment**
- **Effective Communication**
- **Quality Time Spent Together**
- **Spiritual Wellness**
- **Coping Ability**

So look around you today and every day – here at church in this sanctuary, at home, at work, at school, everywhere – and find that which is good and thank God for it; identify those persons in your life who are loving, caring and helpful, and thank God for those persons. And thank those persons directly. This will help us to remember that **God is present and with us in the ordinary, routine events of our daily life. For I believe that our practice of giving thanks – the act of thanksgiving - brings God's presence more readily and clearly to our recognition.**

One of the liturgical resources I use from time to time (*Litanies and Other Prayers For the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C*, by Phyllis Cole and Everett Tilson) has a very nice, though fairly long prayer concerning Thanksgiving. I want to close by reading most of it to you. You may either keep your eyes open, or close them and hear these words as a meditation.

O Lord, we gather together to thank you for the good earth, and for all whose labor turns its fruit into abundant life:
 for **parents** more interested in the character of their children than in the measure of their success;
 for **teachers** more attentive to the future of their students than to the fate of their careers;
 for **farmers** more anxious about the quality of their produce than about the quantity of their property;
 for **doctors and nurses** more determined to dispense public health than to accumulate personal wealth;
 for **lawyers** more zealous to guarantee rights than to seek vengeance;
 for **factory workers** more concerned with superior products than with increased production;
 for **Christians** more committed to the empowerment of others than to the elevation of self.

Almighty God we marvel at the majesty of your creation. In Jesus Christ you revealed your love and beauty and integrity; through the Holy Spirit you continue to bless us with this revelation.

No matter where we look, you are there; your spirit is always present:
 to enlighten us when we are confused;
 to comfort us when we are troubled;
 to challenge us when we are complacent;

to strengthen us when we are weak;
to reassure us when we are afraid;
to befriend us when we are lonely;
to lead us when we are lost.

Long before we begin to seek you, you have already found us. O gracious Lord and Holy Lover of all persons, we thank you for the love through which you make your presence known, and we pray for the grace to extend your presence through our love.

Many of the good things of life - food and freedom, faith and fellowship, security and serenity, health and hope, peace and prosperity - have come to some of us in great abundance.

But more members of the human family live in the grip of poverty than recline in the lap of luxury. If we are among the lucky third of the earth's inhabitants, let us not forget the neglected two-thirds.

Help us to remember that, just as these deprived children are your children, they are likewise our brothers and sisters; that, just as you esteem them as members of your family, you expect us to treat them as members of our family.

Enable us to assure them, as Jesus Christ assured us, that neither poverty nor ignorance, neither hunger nor thirst, neither nakedness nor sickness, neither class nor culture, neither race nor religion, nor anything in all creation, can ever separate them from your love or from ours.

Grant us the grace, O Lord, to express our love for all in costly deed and virtuous life, that our words of thanksgiving might bring forth works of thanksgiving. Amen.

**And may I add how truly thankful I am for this opportunity to serve as your pastor!
May you have a blessed and thank-filled Thanksgiving!**

Amen.