

Thanksgiving 2018

11/18/18

1 Thessalonians 5: 16-17

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.

Although Thanksgiving Day is an important American holiday, throughout the world and throughout time mankind has given thanks to God for His ample blessings.

The first immigrants settling in North America beginning in the 1500's held harvest feasts. Members of the first settlement in Jamestown VA in 1610 did the same. From our school history lessons, although not the first Thanksgiving, the most celebrated feast was between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag tribe in 1621. There are several myths surrounding this celebration, and we are given the sanitized version in school.

First of all, historians state that there is no collaborating evidence that any Native American was invited to or attended this celebration. If they did show up, it is thought that the leader of the Wampanoag tribe was making a diplomatic visit, or that members of the tribe were responding to gun shots near their village. So, this was not about a peaceful harvest festival bringing two disparate communities together as we were taught in school. In fact, the Pilgrims in that day were not called Pilgrims at all, but Separatists. It wasn't until 1820 that

Daniel Webster referred to them as ‘Pilgrim Fathers’. The name caught on.

Secondly, this meal did not become an annual event. Shortly after this gathering, if it happened at all, the Separatists raided the graves and storehouses of the Native Americans, and their relationship quickly deescalated into a few hundred years of colonization, oppression, and the ultimate dispossession of the Native Americans.

Furthermore, the nice tribal gentleman Squanto, or Tisquantum, you remember learning about him...he helped translate for the immigrants, and taught the new settlers to trade and plant corn...? Well, he was captured and sold into slavery in Spain. By the time he returned to his people, his entire tribe had died from smallpox, a gift from the Pilgrims.

Sorry to crush the idyllic vision we keep regarding the origins of our Thanksgiving holiday. But despite the legends, myths, and atrocities surrounding Thanksgiving Day, every time we sit down together, we bring new meaning to it. We gather as friends and families, and regardless of our religious affiliation our minds are pointed toward the good things in our lives.

It is traditional that a portion of our rejoicing is spent eating and preparing to eat. Sometimes the stress of organizing meals can detract from our gratitude; we no longer see the occasion as a celebration, but as a tolerated duty. We are no longer of the mindset of looking out upon God’s earth and viewing the

rain as watering the crops and providing moisture, but as a nuisance.

There are times when we allow worldly situations to block the flow of gratitude that otherwise wants to percolate up naturally from our hearts. Yes, the fires in California are a staggering tragedy, but if we can lift our eyes briefly away from the devastation there are moments worthy of thanks. Not all homes and lives were lost. Although many died and are still missing, there were many more who survived. It is unfair to focus only on the destruction. Greg Kidder, plant manager of the Thomas More Catholic Church in Paradise, which was lost to fire, says, “We wake up with hope in our hearts. We are still intact as a community, and we are organizing to meet the physical and spiritual needs of those who are now in shelters.” Outpourings of generosity are being offered to the town and survivors. Wherever there is tragedy, there is love, and resources, and hope flowing. People respond in aid, helping in anyway they can. There is much to be grateful for.

It takes effort and willingness to open our heart to the fullest measure of thanksgiving that our souls yearn to express. Sometimes our bodily personalities, our human egos, get too involved and the result is repressed positive feelings. Sometimes we allow old habits and processes of reacting to dictate our moods, and we simply refuse to be happy, content, and appreciative. Obstinate, we only focus on the negative.

Somewhere during our lives, we have learned to react to challenges in particular ways. We respond to inconvenience

with a haughty indignation because we have seen our parents, friends, or others behave that way. If we don't get our way, we allow the immature behavior of our youth to reawaken.

It is perfectly fine to allow these negative emotions to emerge; they are good. They are indicators that things can be different. The Christ within guides us to utilize these negative emotions and find a solution. We don't need to cling to them and fuel them. Rather, we recognize them, infuse them with love, and let them lead us to solutions and alternative behaviors.

Really, what difference can it make if the turkey isn't done on time? Will an hour make any difference to anyone a week from now, or even in two hours? Everyone will be fat and full and happy; or else they will be griping about how much they ate. That the turkey was an hour late will be forgotten.

What's important is that the family is together; not everyone has that. We can be grateful that we had enough money to even buy a turkey; not everyone has that. We can be grateful that we have a house, an oven, and a table on which to enjoy the meal. Not everyone has that.

As children of God, we have throughout history felt the urge and necessity, and the appropriateness of stopping what we are doing to give thanks to God as a community for what we have been given.

Like many of our holidays, it takes discipline and effort to separate the pomp of the commercialization from the spiritual nature that underlies Thanksgiving Day.

Then in the words of E.P. Powell: Thanksgiving Day is a jewel, to set in the hearts of honest men; but be careful that you do not take the day and leave out the gratitude.

With the focus so heavily on eating, recreation, and of course, Black Friday, it is easy to overlook the deeper meaning of this day: that we are blessed beyond measure; we have been given the opportunity to learn, love, and live.

Regardless of our situation, we can be thankful. Our choice is to endure the things we do not have and be thankful for what we do have. While we are quick to give thanks for what we see as good things in our lives, let us remember to thank God for the challenges, as well. Although pain is natural and inevitable, suffering is a choice. We do not have to energize and emotionalize what is happening to us. When we change our emotions from self-absorption to gratitude, we can understand our pain in a more objective fashion.

When we give thanks, we are also admitting our dependence. I think some people rarely give thanks or show appreciation because of this fear – the fear of appearing dependent, or in some way incapable. When we give thanks to God, we are humbly acknowledging that we are not the source of all that we have, and that God is our Source.

When we look out upon a spectacular sunset, it is easy to say, "Thank You, God." As powerful as we are when we combine all our intellect, gifts, and talents, we can't do that; we can't create a majestic sunset or compel a flower to bloom. We can't create life, but we can be grateful for our life and the lives that we bring into this world as parents. We can't live as an independent, solo, unaccountable person. We are dependent upon someone in some way, and we can be grateful for them. We can't be the smartest, most intelligent, kindest, wealthiest, and best-looking person in the world. But we can be thankful for who God made us to be.

Being grateful isn't difficult; it just takes awareness. William A. Ward, English pioneer Baptist missionary and author, wrote: God gave you a gift of 86,400 seconds today. Have you used one to say "thank you?" ~William A. Ward

It is also good to develop a gratitude to God for the wonderful things other people receive and how they have been blessed. The ability to feel gratitude and happiness when someone else receive something wonderful is proof that you are living in the moment. You aren't thinking about yourself and what could happen in the future or what didn't happen in the past. You are present, right now, experiencing something wonderful; it's just that it is happening to someone else. Their blessing can inspire hope for your own blessing in its own time. Your happiness creates an atmosphere of mutual celebration for the blessings in your life and the lives around you. It is not joy that creates gratitude; it is gratitude that creates joy.

True gratitude is more than words, more than the formal sentiments and etiquette we learn in ‘please’ and ‘thank you’. It is an inner expression in response to God’s grace; an innate whisper of the soul in response to something that we didn’t earn or deserve.

I think it is also fitting that we should discuss thanksgiving prior to our big celebration on Thursday. One of the natures of gratitude is to give thanks for God’s blessings that have yet to appear. Philippians 4:6 teaches us: *In nothing be anxious; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.* This is what Jesus taught through many of his prayers before he performed his miracles – he thanked God for what was to happen.

In John 6:11 tells us: Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

In John 11, at the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus commanded that they roll the stone away. Then he lifted up his eyes and said "Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me." He then said, Lazarus come forth.

In Luke 17, ten lepers come to Jesus for healing. All were healed, but only one of them returned to give thanks and openly glorify God. Jesus said to him "Arise, go thy way; thy faith hath made thee whole". This is an interesting incident, because although all ten were healed physically, when Jesus

said that this last leper was made whole he used the Greek word "sozo" which means 'salvation'. It involves the salvation of the spirit and soul, as well as the body, the whole person. In effect, Jesus was telling him that he was also brought into a right relationship with God by giving thanks for his healing. He had received more than just physical healing!

We can take this lesson and apply it to our own thanks giving. In the words of Meister Eckhart: If the only prayer you said in your whole life was, "thank you," that would suffice.

On December 2, the Advent season begins: where we acknowledge the spiritual qualities of Hope, Peace, Love, and Joy. For me, there is no greater quality to herald in this reverent time than by becoming more aware of gratitude.

So I pray that as you celebrate Thanksgiving Day, that somewhere between the football games, parades, running a Turkey trot, concerts, meals, setting up the Christmas Tree, photo album browsing, games, and other family activities, you find a moment to be aware and be grateful. I pray that for every time you or someone else smiles you offer up a "Thank You God." Every time someone enters or leaves the room, "Thank You God". I pray that amidst all the celebration and jubilation, or the quiet peace of being alone, that you take a moment to count your blessings. I pray for each of you a heart filled with joy, love, laughter, peace, contentment, and gratitude. Happy Thanksgiving!

Let us pray....