

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

November 29, 2009

“Living Thanksgiving”

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Habakkuk 3:17-19

¹⁷Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold
and there is no herd in the stalls,
¹⁸yet I will rejoice in the LORD;
I will exult in the God of my salvation.
¹⁹GOD, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
and makes me tread upon the heights.

To the leader: with stringed instruments.

Luke 17:11-19

¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹²As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³they called out, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’ ¹⁴When he saw them, he said to them, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’ And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷Then Jesus asked, ‘Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?’ ¹⁸Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?’ ¹⁹Then he said to him, ‘Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.’

With the possible exception of the Fourth of July, I believe that Thanksgiving is just about my favorite holiday. I’m not quite certain why.

Maybe it is because Thanksgiving is the only day the Detroit Lions get to play on national television. No, that certainly can’t be it.

Perhaps it is because of the historical nature of the observance, and the Pilgrims our Congregational ancestors. This important national holiday is based upon their history. It is kind of nice to be able to celebrate a day that the patriarchs and matriarchs of your religious tradition helped to create. When I was a child I used to brag about it and I am most certain that my friends grew tired of my obnoxious ranting about Separatists, Pilgrims, and Congregationalists. I’m sure they wondered why I cared.

And when you get right down to it, even for us Congregationalists, Thanksgiving needs to be more than an historical celebration of the Pilgrims.

Perhaps my fondness for Thanksgiving Day comes in the identity of the celebration itself. Thanksgiving, by nature, tends to be less commercialized. Although the Christmas shopping season has swallowed up the calendar around it, and the day after Thanksgiving is known as "Black Friday," Thanksgiving Day itself tends to remain relatively pure. At the very worst it is a deep breath before the rush of the Christmas season. Yes, there are football games and parades but I don't think Belle Tire and Art Van have any Thanksgiving Day sales.

There is a rather obvious explanation- the food. I asked the Pilgrim Fellowship youth last week about their favorite Thanksgiving food and they surprised me by mentioning mashed potatoes and stuffing. For me it is the turkey, green bean casserole, mashed potatoes, and cherry pie. You may keep your pumpkin pie, thank you! Few can argue about this reason to enjoy Thanksgiving. It is one day that we give ourselves permission to eat ourselves into oblivion without feeling too much guilt. Thanksgiving is a cornucopia of smells and tastes.

But as I thought about it, I have decided that for me the special nature of Thanksgiving is contained in the power of my recollection. My memories of the day are the most vivid of all celebrations. I remember the crowded dining room at my Aunt Phyllis' home, cousins and uncles and aunts all speaking at the same time, and worrying about whether or not Uncle George would have two pieces of pie before I had one. I remember Thanksgiving Day football games in the yard, an hour or so after eating the feast. It was much more fun playing football when there was snow on the ground. I remember the year my mother invited some residents of a group home over for Thanksgiving dinner and how angry I was at her for doing that and how ashamed I felt later when the day turned out so well. I remember the year that my family gathered at a Lansing restaurant for brunch and the tears of my brother who was grieving a separation and impending divorce. I remember the difficult phone conversation with my father on Thanksgiving Day 2001, exactly one month after my mother had died. I remember Laura, the girls, and I driving up to Park City, UT and spending the Thanksgiving weekend watching old family videos, preparing Christmas wish lists and Christmas cards-between visits to the hot tub. Remembering- this is why I love Thanksgiving.

Remembering is part of the purpose of the day. The act of giving thanks comes by first remembering how it is that we have received the blessings of the present. Thanksgiving is a day in which memories stir an appreciation for what we have and for what has been given to us. It is a day to remember that those who may be less fortunate than we are. It is a day to remember that there is a power that is greater than the struggles of our most frantic labors, the worries of our troubled times, and the pretense of our selfish plans. It is a day to remember who we are- in the blessings of food, shelter, and human achievement. It is a day to remember who we are- in the blessings of love from those around us. It is a day to remember who we are- in our dependence upon the grace of a God who has created us, redeemed us, and now sustains us in all things.

The story from Luke tells of ten lepers, isolated from society by their disease, then suddenly made well and clean through the words of Jesus. The ten leave to

perhaps celebrate their good fortune and to take advantage of something they had not had in quite some time: good health and a normal life. One leper returns, a Samaritan, an outsider, to praise God in the actions of Jesus Christ for his healing.

Jesus asks, "Where are the other nine?" The answer is away- celebrating, sleeping, playing, worshipping, preoccupied, selfish, perhaps even confused and doubtful. The other nine are lost in the activity of life. The one returns recognizing that the blessing of his healing is a gift from God. It is not the end of his story but the beginning, the road to even more wholeness and healing. He is now on his way in life changed by the recognition of such blessing. He has remembered the truth. And he is now an example of gratitude. Gratitude teaches us the truth about things, the truth about whose we are, the truth about the source of our blessings, and the truth about what we are supposed to do with those blessings.

The ancient words of the prophet Habbakuk paint a different picture of Thanksgiving. Perhaps it is one that is more like ours in this current time and place. "Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vine; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation."

Rather than a litany of blessing and success, the prophet describes a rather bleak and depressing picture of reality. Failure, perhaps recession and depression, is the tone of the times. Yet in the midst of that darkness he cries out in thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is confidence and hope. Remembering thanksgiving is to recognize that gratitude begins with God and God's action, not with our own success and comfort. Like the leper who returned he was thankful that in times of plenty and in times of want, he was part of God's plan of love, redemption, and healing. He remembered that giving thanks did not begin with his station in life but with the promise that is ours through the grace of our God. How does one celebrate Thanksgiving in a time of failure and want, worry and strife? The same way one does when celebrating the blessing of healing. By returning to the source of what was, what is, and what will be; but trusting in God's constant faithfulness; and by finding hope in God's redeeming action in all of history.

This week the earth was graced with the beauty of a light show, the Leonid meteor shower. Whenever this event takes place we are confronted with all sorts of news stories and energetic weathermen who tell us what we need to do in order to enjoy the falling stars to their fullest. These are things we usually don't do- stay up until well after midnight or get up well before sunrise and move ourselves away from the lights of our comfortable cities and neighborhoods.

I am reminded of Emerson's thought that if the stars only came out once a year, we would have a holiday around it. Everything would stop and we would all make plans to stop everything else in life to go out to see them. Emerson's words were really a comment on our gratitude. It is easy to appreciate the one day event and to hit the pause button on our lives to celebrate Thanksgiving. It is much more difficult for us to remember and live daily in gratitude for the constancy of God. That is a living thanksgiving. That is a faith that remembers the presence of God in what has gone before and honors the need for God in what will yet be.

I recall as a small child, receiving the privilege of staying up late on New Year's Eve and watching the 11:30 movie on Channel 3 out of Kalamazoo. Usually the movie

would be a Ma and Pa Kettle classic. I don't recall much about the movie other than a dinner scene where Ma would go out on the porch, ring the triangle, and then the kids would come running from every corner of the yard and every building on the farm. They would fight for a seat at the table, grabbing for the dinner rolls or the fried chicken in all sorts of noise and confusion. Finally Ma would yell out, "Hold it." The table would then grow quiet while Pa would raise his eyes to heaven, tip his hat and say, "Much obliged, Lord." Then the screaming and grabbing and eating would commence again.

It made for a silly scene but it also seems a bit true. We tend to think of this time of year as a short pause of appreciation in an otherwise too busy life. Few of us celebrate Thanksgiving as a life changing experience of remembering and being called into a different relationship with God. Yet we are all called to a higher standard than temporary appreciation. We are called to remember the truth about our lives. We are called to remember the source of our blessing. We are called to remember what we are called to do with our blessings. Gratitude is not observing Thanksgiving but living Thanksgiving through actions of appreciation and praise.