

“Abounding With Thanksgiving”

Psalm 103:1-14; Colossians 2:6-10

November 20, 2022

For a family filled with great cooks, it shouldn't surprise you that Thanksgiving is a much-anticipated holiday for us. My aunt Judy used to host the event every year at her house in Charlotte. She made the turkey; it was provided by my uncle who owned a poultry business. It gave him access to the freshest, heritage turkeys. Aunt Judy also made the stuffing. There were two kinds – one cooked in the bird, one cooked in a pan alongside it. Both are heavy with Neese's sausage, wild mushrooms and thyme. Everyone knows if you want to get the stuffing cooked in the bird, you'd better line up early. Some years, making sure you get some even meant jockeying to get near the front of the line with the children. The rest of us in the family would supply the myriad sides. There are the usual suspects, of course; sweet potatoes loaded with maple syrup, green bean casserole, homemade rolls and biscuits packed with a year's worth of butter. There's always a host of desserts laying on the buffet, all just waiting for you once you've had your fill of the savories. There's coconut layer cake and mincemeat and pumpkin pies. When it comes time for Aunt Judy to serve the desserts, a great many of us simply ask for “an Aunt Ann platter.” Now that aunt Ann, is my mom. Many years ago, she set the standard for dessert orders by asking for a piece of EVERY dessert to be put on her plate.

Oh, there are culinary misses from time to time like one year's green bean fiasco in which my aunt used a heavy hand with vinegar. Some years the pumpkin pie is a bit under-baked, thanks to my sister's boys handling the task these days. Even with the occasional misses, the food had us coming back year after year with our mouths watering to Aunt Judy's on Thanksgiving Day.

But it's more than the food when I think about it. A lot more. I really recalled that several years ago when Benji started asking AROUND HALLOWEEN every single day “are we going to Aunt Judy's now?” You see, he was looking forward to Thanksgiving with great expectation. And I realized something the other day. Here was a kid that was far happier munching upon McDonald's chicken nuggets than he was eating steak or any other delicacy for that matter. Ben wasn't really looking forward to the food. Benjamin yearned to be with Alex and Taylor, his two first cousins and his other relatives.

As I thought about Thanksgiving Day this week, I began to imagine my life 40 years from now should the good Lord bless me with that many more. I began to wonder what life would be like if the *only* thing I remembered from Thanksgiving was the food. If all I remembered 40 years from now was the turkey or the stuffing or the casseroles or the pies, my life would be far bleaker, wouldn't it? Gone would be the comfort of smiling and laughing with aunts and uncles, parents and cousins. Gone would be the remembrance of the many kindnesses shown and shared with this particular group of people. At 80, I hope to remember the vanilla-spiked whipped cream and the lush dark meat of the turkey, but I pray to remember and be thankful for all of those wonderful people. The specialness of Thanksgiving isn't so much about the goodness of the food they brought as it is about the people themselves; who they were and what they mean to me.

As we get nearer and nearer to Thursday, it's my ongoing prayer that we remember a particular God as we gather together. And I say that for a reason.

Years ago, I was looking for a good Thanksgiving book to read to Benjamin for Thanksgiving when I discovered something both understandable and yet at the same time disappointing. Here I was skimming through these children's books, simply looking for Thanksgivings lifted up to God. And yet over and over again what I found were these books having children and adults be thankful without a single mention of whom they're thankful to. No God was mentioned at all. I finally found one books that did, at least, mention God. And while that was a vast improvement over its God-neutered peers, thanks weren't offered to a *particular* God. It was instead offered to that fuzzy, generic god which so often stands in place for us in America when we want the trappings of divinity without the mess of Scripture or judgment, or sanctification or much less Jesus Christ. So, in a way, it fell short of the mark too.

Like I said, this absence of Jesus was both understandable and disappointing. Understandable because we're enmeshed in a secular world which seems inclined to divorce religious holidays from their religious meanings. Case in point, Christmas, right around the corner. Soon, red and green hues, tinsel and Santa will bombard our senses. Speeding quickly our way is Black Friday and discount merchandise and that cloyingly sweet

commercial eggnog. Largely absent from the hoopla and celebration is Christ. In fact, several years ago a member of a former church, Tack Springs, shared with me a most humorous story. She said she was in the Hallmark store and was shocked to see the Christmas cards divided into two sections – religious and non-religious. So, it's not surprising that Thanksgiving would suffer the same fate, after all. Here in the USA, we're called to be thankful on Thursday. Thankful because we get the day off from work to stuff ourselves with turkey and cranberry dressing. Thankful that the Lions and the Cowboys play on TV and that this year both games might actually be good. Thankful to be with family. Thankful to have homes. But for many Americans there's NO ONE IN PARTICULAR TO BE THANKFUL TO. So, we're thankful for the things in our life but, having no particular god to be thankful to, we turn to ourselves. We're thankful for our work prowess to provide for our families. Thankful to the doctors for our health and the health of our families. Thankful for our money managers for keeping our investments earning a healthy 5%. We're thankful for the things and the people in our lives. Instead of directing thanks upward to the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob made known to us in Jesus Christ, many Americans end up thanking themselves for the blessings in life.

When we don't direct our thanks to Jesus, it's like being thankful only for the food which has populated the Thanksgiving feasts in our lives without recalling the wonderful presence of the people who gathered with us.

In the 17th chapter of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus runs across a group of lepers approaching Him. They keep their distance, not wanting to bring their disease upon anyone. In Jesus' time, skin afflictions were some of the worst diseases imaginable. To begin with, there was the physical suffering. But, perhaps even more burdensome than the symptoms of the disease was the social ostracism which went with it. People with skin diseases were forced to live on the edges of villages, away from their friends and families. All were scared of them. All were frightened of waking up to see a crimson redness on their skin, the tell-tale signs of a skin disease to come. Not even their wives or husbands would dare come near them. In one fell-swoop, both health and family were removed. But this group of lepers has clearly heard about a particular man, Jesus. Word filtered down through the region that a healing man was coming, walking their way. A man was coming who could take away their disease and, along with it, their ostracism. Can't you imagine their excitement? Their anticipation?

Seeing Jesus come towards them, they're mindful to keep their distance. So, the ten lepers yell out "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" Jesus speaks plainly to them "Go and show yourselves to the priests." The ten men depart, each going as quickly as their feet could carry them to see the priests. Showing them their previously afflicted skin reveals a miracle. Their leprosy is gone and with it departs their exile. Soon, 9 return to their wives. They touch their children for the first time in years, perhaps fuzzling their hair or chuckling their chins. By nightfall, they've enjoyed a wonderful meal in the company of friends and family. Truly, life is good once again. I'm sure these 9 men were thankful. Even a dyed-in-the-wool atheist would be grateful for a blessing like this – the resumption of a normal life from the lonely wreckage of social isolation. So, I imagine they sat and ate and were positively drunk with the physical blessings of their life.

In a lot of ways, I think this kind of gratitude is what many Americans will experience this Thanksgiving Day. We'll be grateful for our warm homes, our friends, the food at our tables. And don't get me wrong, that's all very good. However, if we're only thankful for the things in our life, I think we've missed the point. We Christians are called to remember the blessings in our life as a means to return us to the feet of Jesus Christ, just like that one Samaritan leper. You see, things happen as we all know. Life passes, good times go by quicker than we'd like. Storm clouds gather over the sunniest of places from time to time. If we're merely thankful for the things in our life then what in the world will we have left when and if those things go?

The Book of Ecclesiastes reminds us that time and circumstance befall us all. Jesus Himself teaches us that the rain falls on the heads of the righteous and unrighteous alike. If we're only thankful for the things in our life then what's left for us in the difficult and dark times? One leper returns to the Lord Jesus. Praising God he comes and lays himself at the feet of the Son of God. He not only gives thanks to God, he returns to Jesus and gives that thanks to Him in person. It's then that Jesus utters these curious words. "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

But hang on a second. This Samaritan has already been healed, hasn't he? He's been healed just like the other 9 who, presumably, have missed the point. So why in the world would Jesus say that this faithful response, this

return to Him and the prostration at His feet has made this leper well? Could it be that the physical healing wasn't the real blessing Jesus wished to give? Could it be that the friends and the families and the warm home we'll return to this day aren't the ultimate blessing of our lives? Could it be that the stuff which populates our life isn't the greatest gift God offers us and that maybe we get too caught up in the turkey and pies, the stuff of our life to remember it? What this one Samaritan leper discovered that day long ago and what I pray all of us will hold closely in our hearts is that the greatest blessing, the thing that can never be taken away from us is the particular blessing of a particular God in the sharing of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In His life and in His death, Jesus Christ has broken the power of sin and death. By His stripes, *we* are healed. By His willingness to lay down His life for us, we are assured of the Kingdom of God. Death has no sting. Sin has no hold. Eternal deliverance has come through Him to us. And if you peel away all the layers of your life, that blessing stands right smack dab in the center of it. Even if you take away the home and the friends and the health and the cars, the pies and the casseroles, this blessing of Jesus Christ, Scripture tells us, will never leave us, never forsake us. *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."* And that alone is something to be thankful for. But it's more than that, a whole lot more.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is here with us even now. He's there when we get home. He's there when jobs are lost. He's there as we fight to make ends meet. He's there when we find ourselves at the hospital sitting at the bed of a dying loved one. *Jesus is with us. And that's the real Joy of Thanksgiving.*

We can be thankful for the things in our life, and I hope we are. But there is a particular God who stands behind every one of them. And even more important than that. This is a particular God who shares with us His only Son. Through Him comes the Grace which covers our sin and the ongoing presence which tinges even the worst days of our life with an amazing hope for the future!

Thanks be to Him. In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.