

"In All Things Give Thanks"

Date: November 23, 2014 Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Thanksgiving Sunday Theme: Thanksgiving

Text: Luke 17:11-19

In *all* things give thanks! That is our theme this morning. In all things give thanks. That reminds me of a joke. A woman came up to her pastor after the worship service and thanked him for the sermon he had just preached. In response the pastor humbly said, “Don’t thank me; thank the Lord.” And the woman answered, “Well, I thought about that, but it wasn’t *that* good.”

Back during the dark days of 1929, during the Great Depression, a group of ministers in the Northeast, all graduates of Boston School of theology, gathered to discuss how they should conduct their Thanksgiving worship services.

Things were as bad as they could get, with no signs of relief. The bread lines were depressingly long; the stock market had plummeted, and the term *Great Depression* seemed a very vivid description of the mood of the country.

The ministers thought they should only lightly touch upon the subject of thanksgiving, in light of all the misery around them. After all, what was there to be thankful for? But it was Dr. William L. Stiger, pastor of a large congregation in the city that rallied the group.

This was not the time, he suggested, to give only a passing mention to Thanksgiving. No, just the opposite. This was the time for the nation to get matters into perspective, and to thank God for all His blessings which are always there, but perhaps a bit hidden due to intense hardship.

I suggest to you that those ministers struck upon something. The most intense moments of thankfulness are not always found in times of plenty, but rather when difficulties abound. Think of the Pilgrims that first Thanksgiving.

Half of their people had died. They had left their homeland far behind and they were wintering in a foreign land. But still, there was thanksgiving to God. Their gratitude was not *for* something, but *in* something.

It was that same sense of gratitude which led Abraham Lincoln to formally establish the first Thanksgiving Day, in the midst of a national civil war. The nation was torn apart. The list of casualties seemed to have no end. And the nation struggled for survival. But – Lincoln knew there were still blessings for which to be thankful!

Thanksgiving in our time is a mild-mannered holiday – full of football, pumpkin pie and family reunions. But that's not a realistic picture of Thanksgiving. It is more often born of adversity and difficult times.

Many of the great outpourings of thanksgiving have occurred under quite dire circumstances; it makes you wonder why people give thanks. It would seem a more reasonable response would be bitterness and ingratitude. And yet, people still offer up their prayers of thanks.

It's quite a paradox. In times of plenty we become indifferent. The smallest gifts are overlooked and unappreciated. But then, let the hard times come, the threat that we might lose something important, and we are suddenly jolted into sudden recognition and gratitude. A story to illustrate.

John Wesley was the founder of the Methodist Movement. He attended Oxford University in London. During John's student days, a poor porter knocked on Wesley's door one evening, asking if he could come in and speak with him. A porter, by the way is simply a person hired to carry luggage for train passengers.

As they talked, Wesley observed the man's thin coat. It was a cold night and Wesley suggested he had better get another coat. "This is the only coat I have," the porter replied, "and I thank God for it." Wesley asked the man if he had eaten and the porter answered, "I have had nothing today but water to drink, and I thank God for that."

Wesley was growing uneasy in this man's presence, so he reminded the man that he had better get back to his quarters or be locked out. "*Then*, what would you thank God for?" asked Wesley. "I will thank Him that I have dry stones to lie upon," said the porter.

Wesley was deeply impressed with this man's faith and said to him, "You thank God when you have nothing to wear, nothing to eat and no bed to lie on. What else do you thank God for?"

The simple man replied, "I thank God that he has given me life, a heart to love and a desire to serve Him."

After the man had left, with a coat from Wesley's closet, some money for food, and words of appreciation for the witness he had made, Wesley wrote something like this in his journal, "I shall never forget that porter. He convinced me that there is something in religion to which I am a stranger."

There are some of *us* who are a stranger to this kind of faith. We, who have so much, find it difficult to thank God when times are tough, when blessings aren't as abundant, or when life is hard.

We read the words of the apostle Paul in the book of Ephesians when he wrote, “Always give thanks to God the Father, for everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.” And we think, “How is that possible? How is it possible to find something for which to give thanks in every situation?”

It’s not easy, but it is possible. First, we must get over the attitude that life owes us more and more. For many people they find it difficult to give thanks because they are never satisfied. No matter how much they have, it is never enough.

Perhaps it’s the culture we live in, with constant advertising telling us that we need to buy more, we need to have more. It seems that we are never satisfied. The apostle Paul had quite a different attitude. When Paul was in prison, he wrote to the Philippians:

“I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all things through Him who gives me the strength.” (Phil. 4:11-13)

Sisters and brothers in Christ, we must learn to be thankful or we shall surely grow arrogant and self-satisfied. Society teaches us that we must be self-sufficient, never depending on anyone else. So If we have anything of worth, we conclude that we did it all ourselves.

And we forget the source of all our blessings. We forget how interdependent we are upon others. We have reason to give thanks, not just for the stuff that we’ve collected for ourselves. But also for all of the others who have helped us along the way.

There is an old Jimmy Stewart movie called *Shenandoah*. The time frame is the Civil War. Stewart is the father of a very large family. At each meal they gather around the table and give the exact same blessing: “O Lord, we planted the seed and then we harvested the crop. If we had not put the food on the table it wouldn’t be sitting here. But Lord, we give you thanks anyway.” (The sarcasm just dripping.)

This is the problem of the thankless heart. We congratulate ourselves. We leave God out of the picture. We give ourselves over to self-congratulation. We grow arrogant, self-satisfied, and greedy for more. How much is *enough*?

It is good and right that we give God thanks and praise. We have so much for which to be thankful. Not just things, but spiritual blessings as well. Gratitude changes the human heart. Gratitude recognizes that things belong to God and we are merely caretakers while we’re here.

In an instant our lives could change. A natural disaster could take away all of our belongings. A house fire could destroy what we’ve worked a lifetime to possess. The stock market could dive and we could lose our retirement fund. A visit to the doctor could reveal a dramatic change in our health status.

Can we still find it within ourselves to give God thanks, to look for the blessings, even when hardship presses upon us? It is my hope and prayer that each of us takes some time this week to count our blessings, to remember God’s faithfulness, and to give thanks.

I pray that you enjoy your Thanksgiving holiday, where ever you will spend it. God is with us always. Thanks be to God. Amen.