

“Don’t Confuse Creature Comforts with Blessings”

Date: November 22, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Thanksgiving Sunday

Theme: Thanks

Texts: Philippians 4:4-9; John 6:25-35

It’s hard to believe Thanksgiving is only a few days away. My, where did the time go? For many Americans, Thanksgiving is a gluttonous holiday, when we eat too much food and then lay around the house watching football and parades. But for many people, this was not a good year. And for some people, *every* year is difficult.

And so I ask you, is Thanksgiving only for those who have more than they need? I would suggest to you it is not. The truth is, we who have many material possessions may have much to learn from those who have little, but still know how to be thankful.

Thanksgiving in modern times has become a mild-mannered holiday, full of football, hot apple or pumpkin pie and family get-togethers. But realistically, thanksgiving and gratitude are often born out of adversity, in the midst of difficult times.

Many of the greatest expressions of thanksgiving have occurred under the direst of circumstances, when you might even wonder *why* people gave thanks. It would seem more natural to be bitter and ungrateful.

The Pilgrims almost died from hunger, disease and the elements their first year in the new land. And yet they gathered with the native people who helped them, and expressed gratitude. The apostle Paul, writing from a prison cell, knowing he would probably die soon at the hands of the Romans, wrote to the Philippians, “I give thanks to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was a German pastor, imprisoned in 1943 for

his political and Christian opposition to the Nazi regime. On the day he was hung, he carried out a prayer service for the other prisoners.

One of the prisoners later wrote about it, telling how Bonhoeffer had lifted their spirits, always ready to spread an atmosphere of happiness and joy, expressing gratitude for the mere fact he was alive. Just before the German soldiers took him out of his cell to take him to the gallows, the German pastor said to his fellow prisoners, "This is the end. But for me, it is the beginning of life."

And so it is, that out of great suffering have also come the greatest expressions of gratitude. Therefore, I suggest to you this morning that we should not count creature comforts as our only blessings. But instead, we should look to the *spiritual* for our true and eternal blessings.

In the Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus is confronted by a crowd of people. He has already fed the 5,000; a miracle we are told. He has just walked across the water, another miracle. And still the people are clamoring for another sign from God that Jesus is who he says he is.

Jesus tells them not to labor for food that spoils, but rather for the food that endures for eternal life. In other words, Jesus is telling the people that this life is not all there is. There is an eternal life and we must not become addicted to or attached to the things of this world. More than food, it is faith in the Son of God which will lead to eternal life.

Jesus tells the crowd, "I am the Bread of Life. He who comes to me will never go hungry." Obviously he is not talking about food for the body. He's talking about food for the soul, food which feeds the soul for eternal life. It is faith; and not just faith in anything, but faith in God's Son, Jesus.

Far too many people confuse creature comforts with God's blessings. If they have a lot of stuff, a lot of material possessions, they see it as a sign

that God loves them in a special way. “I have stuff. I am blessed.” Think about the things that many of us say are signs of God’s blessings upon us; are they not material things? But I tell you, blessed are they who have little, but who know God. They are truly blessed; rich is their reward in Heaven.

There are people who live in million dollar homes, who drive the finest cars and who have unlimited resources, but don’t even pretend they are thankful on this important holiday. They might even be a little annoyed they don’t have more.

Meanwhile, there are people in small huts in South America and in Africa who have nothing that we would count as valuable, and yet they offer a sincere prayer of gratitude to God each and every day, for the little they do have.

What I’m saying is this: our ability to give thanks to God is not, or should not, be proportional to our circumstances. Rather, our thanksgiving is proportional to our faith in God. If we know God, if we trust God, if we depend upon God, then we are able to relax and give God thanks, whether we have much or we have little.

And so I think the ability to give thanks to God is a reflection on how much we trust and depend upon the Lord. Do we truly believe God is the source of our lives, and the One who provides all that we need? Do we believe that God’s will is always in our best interest?

Do we believe that whatever happens, God will be with us? It is a matter of trust. If we believe all things work together for good for those who love God, then we are able to bring a faith perspective to whatever trial or trouble comes our way. Thus, we can give God thanks and praise even in times of difficulty.

Our forebears, the original Pilgrims who had the first Thanksgiving

meal, were not so much thankful *for* something, as they were thankful *in* something. It was a harsh winter; many of their friends had died before the first Thanksgiving. However, in bounty or in want, they were thankful. In feast or in famine, they were thankful. In joy or in misery, they were thankful

O my friends, there is a big difference between being thankful *for* things, and being thankful *in* all things. A story to illustrate: During a harvest festival in India, a widow arrived at her church with an extra-large offering of rice – far more than the poor woman could be expected to afford.

The itinerant pastor of the church did not know the widow well, but he did know that she was very poor. And so he asked her if she were making the offering in gratitude for some unusual blessing.

“Yes,” replied the woman. “My son was sick and I promised a large gift to God if he got well.” The pastor answered, “And your son has recovered?” The woman paused before answering. “No,” she said, “He died last week. But I know he is in God’s care, and for that I am especially thankful.”

O dear ones, it is an inescapable truth of Christianity that hardship will come. No one is immune, from the greatest to the least of us. But there is also another inescapable truth of our faith. We are not to be discouraged. Jesus said, “Let not your hearts be troubled. Lo, I am with you always.” Paul encouraged the Philippians, “Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say it, rejoice!”

It is not a test of our faith to give thanks when the sun is shining. It is not the test of character when everything you touch turns to gold. It is not the test of our metal when we have won the prize. The test of our faith comes when we have been knocked down, when things are not going well, when life is hard.

And so, we must learn to give God thanks in all the circumstances of life. Therefore, may our prayer in times of trouble be, “O God who has given me much, I pray that you grant me one more thing: a grateful heart.”

May it be so in each of our lives. And may you have a blessed Thanksgiving, whatever is happening in your life right now. Amen.