

“What is There to be Thankful For?”

Date: November 18, 2018

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Luke 17:11-17; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Occasion: Thanksgiving Holiday

Theme: Thanksgiving

One of my favorite Peanuts comic strips is the one that came out some years ago just a few days before Thanksgiving. Lucy is feeling sorry for herself and she laments: “My life is a drag. I’m completely fed up. I’ve never felt so low in my life.”

Her little brother Linus tries to console her and says, “Lucy, when you’re in a mood like this, you should try to think of things you have to be thankful for, in other words, count your blessings.”

To that Lucy says, “Ha! That’s a good one! I could count my blessings on one finger. I’ve never had anything and I never will have anything. I don’t get half the breaks that other people do. Nothing ever goes right for me! And you talk about counting blessings! You talk about being thankful! What do I have to be thankful for?”

Linus says, “Well, for one thing, you have a little brother who loves you.” With that, Lucy runs over and hugs her little brother as she cries tears of joy. And while she’s hugging him tightly, Linus says, “Every now and then, I say the right thing.”

As we prepare our hearts and homes for the national holiday of Thanksgiving, we may ask “What is there to be thankful for?” For too many people they are like the character of Lucy in the Peanuts comic strip, focusing only on the negative and failing to see the good in the world.

Back in the dark days of 1929, a group of ministers gathered to discuss how they should conduct their Thanksgiving Sunday services. Things were about as sad as they could get, with no sign of relief. The

bread lines were depressingly long, the stock market had plummeted, and the term Great Depression seemed an apt description for the mood of the country.

The ministers thought they should only lightly touch on the theme of thanksgiving, out of sympathy for all of the human misery all 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, who rallied the group. This is not the time, he suggested, to give a mere passing mention to Thanksgiving.

Just the opposite. This was the time for the nation to get matters in perspective and thank God for blessings always present, but perhaps suppressed due to hardship. I think Dr. Stiger hit upon an important truth. The most intense times of thankfulness are not found in times of plenty, but when difficulties abound.

Think of the Pilgrims that first Thanksgiving. Half of their number had died; they were men without a country, but still there was thanksgiving to God. Their Thanksgiving was not *for* something, but *in* something.

It was that same sense of gratitude that led Abraham Lincoln to formally establish the first Thanksgiving Day, in the midst of the national civil war, when the list of casualties seemed to have no end, and the very nation struggled for survival.

Perhaps in your own life, right now, you are going through some intense hardship. Maybe you're experiencing your own Great Depression. Why should you be thankful? May I suggest three reasons? First, we must learn to be thankful, or we become bitter. Second, we must learn to be thankful, or we will become discouraged. And third, we must learn to be thankful, or we will grow arrogant and feel entitled.

Gratitude is the antidote to these negative attitudes. In the book of 1 Thessalonians, we hear these words: “In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.” This means in *everything* – things that seem hopeful as well things that seem difficult. It is the will of God that we be thankful.

People react to life so differently. If I were to survey many of you, there would be a significant number who are worried sick about the future. In some instances there is a concrete reason for your worry – a family member who is sick, loss of a job, a bad report from the doctor. But there are others who worry all out of proportion to their difficulties. And that’s sad.

If we are obsessed with our fears about tomorrow, it will be difficult if not impossible, to feel a spirit of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving requires trust in God. How can we give God thanks if we really do not believe that God is the source of our lives and everything we have in them? How can we give thanks if we do not believe that God’s will is always for our best good? How can we give thanks if we do not believe that no matter what comes our way, God will be with us? Thanksgiving requires trust in God.

When Robinson Crusoe was shipwrecked on his lonely island, he wrote two columns, which he called “the evil” and “the good.” He was cast upon a lonely island, but he was still alive, unlike his shipmates. He was separated from his family back home, but he was not starving. He had no clothes, but he was in a hot climate where he didn’t need them. He had no one to speak to, but God had sent the ship near to the shore so that he could get out of it all things necessary for his wants.

Crusoe thus concluded that there was not any condition in the world so miserable, but there was something for which to be thankful. The key to

worrying less is to give thanks more. Here is a spiritual truth that many have failed to learn: Our sense of well-being is *not* proportional to our circumstances. Rather, our sense of well-being is proportional to our faith in God. If we know God, trust God, depend on God, then we will be able to relax when things are difficult, and give God thanks, whether we have much, or we have little.

In the familiar Gospel story of the ten men with leprosy who were healed by Jesus, only one returned to say, “thank you.” What happened to the rest? Were they too busy? Perhaps. Too self-occupied? More likely. But could it be that a few of the nine didn’t say thanks because they didn’t feel all that grateful? Could it be that they still felt like outcasts?

Maybe they were thinking, “Well, yes, I’m healed. But now I’ve got to get a job and support myself. I lost everything while I was sick. My own family turned their back on me. What do I do now?” And so, rather than feeling grateful for what had been done for them, perhaps they were anxious, maybe even terrified of what lay ahead.

People react to life so differently. The old proverb that some people see the glass half full and others see it half empty is so appropriate.

May we look for, and find the simple things to be thankful for. A thing like life itself, just being alive is a miracle. Or things of beauty – music, art, flowers, nature. Our families, even as mixed up as they can sometimes be, are the source of much joy. They helped us become who we are today.

For our five senses, for the food we have to eat and the bed we have to sleep in. For this great nation of ours, as conflicted as we seem right now, it is still a wonderful place to live. If we look, we will discover that the glass is at least half full.

In just a few moments we're going to sing a song entitled "Now thank we all our God." Do you know the story behind it? Martin Rinkert was a minister in the little town of Eilenberg in Germany some 350 years ago. He was the son of a poor coppersmith, but somehow he managed to work his way through an education.

Finally, in the year 1617, he was offered the post of Archdeacon in his hometown parish. A year later, what has come to be known as the Thirty-Years War broke out. His town was caught right in the middle. In 1637, the massive plague that swept across the continent hit Eilenberg

People died at the rate of 50 a day, and the man called upon to bury most of them was Martin Rinkert. In all, over 8,000 people died, including Martin's own wife. His ministry came to an end about 11 years later, just one year after the conclusion of the war. His ministry spanned 32 years, all but the first and the last overwhelmed by the great conflict that engulfed his town. These were tough times in which to be thankful. But he did. And he wrote these words:

"Now thank we all our God,  
With heart and hand and voices;  
Who wondrous things has done,  
In whom the world rejoices."

It takes a great faith to come through such hardship and express gratitude. But here is the lesson – when surrounded by tremendous adversity, thanksgiving will deliver you. May we stand and sing of our faith.

Amen.