

“Think and Thank”

Date: Nov. 22, 2015

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Deuteronomy 8:7-18; Luke 17:11-19

Occasion: Thanksgiving Weekend

Theme: Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving is a holiday celebrated in the United States on the fourth Thursday in November. The “First Thanksgiving,” commonly recognized, was celebrated by the Pilgrims after their first harvest in the New World in 1621. The feast lasted three days and it was attended by 90 Native Americans and 53 Pilgrims.

During the American Revolutionary War, the Continental Congress appointed one *or more* thanksgiving days each year, recommending that each of the various states observe the occasion.

The First National Proclamation of Thanksgiving was given by the Continental Congress in 1777 from its temporary location in York, Pennsylvania, while the British occupied the national capital at Philadelphia.

But it was not until the middle of the 19th century that it became official. In the middle of the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln, prompted by a series of editorials written by Sarah Josepha Hale, proclaimed a national Thanksgiving Day, to be celebrated on the final Thursday in November, 1863.

Who was Sarah Hale? She was an American writer. You might know one of her works. She is the author of the nursery rhyme, “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” Sarah famously campaigned for the creation of the American holiday we know as Thanksgiving. Her advocacy for the national holiday began in 1846 and lasted 17 years before she

was successful. She wrote to 5 different Presidents of the United States.

Her initial letters failed to persuade, but the letter she wrote to Lincoln convinced him to support legislation establishing a national holiday in 1863. The new holiday was considered a unifying day amidst the stress and turmoil of the American Civil War. (*Wikipedia*)

Someone has once said, “If we stopped to think more, we would stop to thank more.” I’d like us to think a little bit today, so that we might be more thankful. As I surveyed the history of this national holiday, it occurred to me that at each of its various stages the nation was in a time of turmoil

The Pilgrims were in a new land, struggling to survive their first harsh winter in New England. They didn’t have much, but they were grateful for their lives. During the American Revolution, the British were occupying the capital of our fledgling nation. The Continental Congress thought it would be important for the people of America to give thanks.

Lincoln was convinced it would be good for the nation to give thanks, in the midst of a war that was slaughtering our own citizens. So much land destroyed, so much property laid waste: Times were not easy, but tense and tenuous. And our nation’s leaders called our people to a day of reflection and giving thanks.

It reminds me of the times in which we live today. People living in fear of both domestic and foreign terrorists, as the horror of the French attacks are still fresh in our memories. And yet, if we pause to think, there is still much for which to give thanks.

We gather today to give thanks to Almighty God for all the blessings our Creator has bestowed upon us. For Christians, thanksgiving is not merely a holiday; it ought to be a lifestyle.

As a child, I was taught to say “Please and thank you.” You were as well. That is simply common courtesy. But for people of faith, the attitude of gratitude goes beyond simple manners. The act of thanksgiving is integral to who we are as a people of faith.

In the book of Deuteronomy we are reminded it is God who provides for the Israelites, and by extension, it is God who provides for us. It was God who brought them to the Promised Land; it was God who sustained them in the desert. It is God who is now providing them with this abundance of food, as described in Deuteronomy 8.

Israel is warned not to forget the Lord God. God admonishes them, “You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is God who gives you the power to gain wealth.”

The lesson is simply this – whatever good things we have, it was not our effort alone that gave us these blessings. All we have is traceable back to the goodness and generosity of God. Therefore, think, and thank!

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus heals ten lepers, but only one of them returns to give our Lord thanks. It’s a painful story to hear, because if we’re honest we can recognize ourselves among the nine who failed to give thanks. Too often we take our blessings for granted.

We hear a lot of people these days talking about their rights. I can be among them, sometimes. But we need to be careful that we

don't slide over into the attitude of privilege and entitlement, where we believe that life owes us.

Life itself is a gift, not a right. No one demands to be born into this world. Our very existence has been given to us. It is a gift for which we need to be grateful, and not take it for granted. God is the great Gift-Giver. Eternal life is not a gift given to everyone, but a privilege granted by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We don't earn our salvation, we receive it as a gift.

And our response is gratitude. We are to be grateful. At least once a year, it is good and proper that we take inventory of all our blessings. Better still, we should do it every day.

During our last sermon series on Soul Keeping, John Ortberg challenged us to keep a daily diary in which we count our blessings. I've been trying to carry on that practice in my daily devotions. It has been a real blessing for me to do so.

I'll tell you from personal experience, when I get in one of those moods when I start feeling sorry for myself, when I start worrying about the state of the world, if I spend some time thinking and thanking, my mood changes.

The best antidote for self-pity is thanking God for one's blessings. I know that our country faces some serious problems and challenges; I don't want to minimize that at all. But when you've over-dosed on watching the news or reading the political memes on Facebook, spend some time thinking of all your blessings, and then thank God for each one.

Gratitude will not make the terrorists go away. But it will certainly change our attitude. Because the one to whom I give thanks,

is the One in whom I trust. Despite all the fear in the world, I still trust in the power, the grace, the mercy, the providence of our all-loving God. This Thanksgiving, let us all think, and thank. Thanks be to God, from whom all blessings flow. Amen and amen!