

Sunday Sermon
November 18, 2018
Community Thanksgiving
I Thessalonians 5:15-18
“How Can We Give Thanks?”

Introduction

One time when I was a chaplain in a hospital trauma center, I had a patient who was gravely ill. The man hung onto the edge of life, slipping in and out of a coma. Periodically, I would go by to see the man, but I really could not tell whether he even knew I was in the room.

Days passed, and miraculously the man came out of the coma and began the slow journey to recovery. One day I went by to visit him, and he shared with me about his near-death experience.

He said, “I could feel myself fading in and out, and at one time I thought, I must be in heaven. But then I looked up and I saw you standing there, and I figured, no, this can’t be heaven.”

For some of us it has been a slow, tough journey to Thanksgiving, from a year of fading in and out of despair and hope, expectations and disappointments. We look around and know this cannot be heaven. How can we say thanks when the difficulties of life overwhelm us?

Truth is we are pilgrims, all of us, on a journey, a great caravan of humanity seeking refuge, a home. And we find that thanksgiving often takes place in the context of pain and suffering. After all, is that not the history of this holiday? The first official Thanksgiving was established by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863 in the middle of the war that divided our country and put brothers fighting brothers. Years later FDR declared the fourth Thursday in November as Thanksgiving Day, just weeks before the nation would enter World War II.

Genuine Thanksgiving often grows in the pains of our lives.

I

And I admit every year I find preaching on Thanksgiving to be one of the most difficult preaching assignments. I mean, other than saying, "we ought to give thanks to God for our blessings," what is there to say?

And that is the problem, is it not? True Thanksgiving, a genuine expression of gratitude, cannot be coerced or commanded. It is like when your mother, after you forgot to say "thank you," prompted you with a not-so-subtle, "You're welcome." Sure, then you said "thanks," but it did not mean the same at that point.*

Thanksgiving has to come from the heart. And Thanksgiving goes to the heart. Karl Barth said, “All theology, [all understanding of God] begins with doxology, praise, gratitude to God. The simplest form of worship,” Barth said, “is simply giving thanks.”

I understand that gospel singer and song writer Andrae Crouch had a stuttering problem as a child. It started when he was three years old. He was on his way to get ice cream at a store down the street from where his parents had a business. And a man snatched him up and started running with him. Andrae’s parents heard him yell and saw the man carrying him across the street, and then the man dropped him. Andrae was so traumatized that he started stuttering. Often his twin sister Sandra had to speak for him.

Then one day his father said, “Andrae, you never stutter when you sing. Why don’t you act like you’re singing when you answer a question?” So he did, and that is how this great musician started singing and stopped stuttering.

And the boy who sang his answers through childhood grew up to write, “How can I say thanks for the things you have done for me? The voices of a million angels could not express my gratitude.”

II

I am aware of how hollow it can sound for a minister to stand up on the Sunday before Thanksgiving and tell folks to count their blessings. Some folks may not be able to count very high.

I am aware that it is possible to have a totally miserable Thanksgiving. This holiday where so much focus is on family and togetherness can be very painful when there is an empty chair at the table, whether it is from illness or death or estrangement or simply distance. For some this will be a week of reflecting not on what has been received but on what has been lost.

And yet the observance of Thanksgiving can provide a kind of internal remedy for the sadness or anxieties we carry. As we list blessings from God and give thanks, anxieties can be transformed into peace, emptiness transformed into communion. And we find the ability to face what we did not think we could.

III

Years ago my family gathered, as we had for years, to eat Thanksgiving dinner at my parents’ house. At one end of the table sat my father, a wise once strong man, who at the end of life was weak with congestive heart failure. At the other end of the table sat our son, a 6-foot tall, strong young adult, who has severe mental disabilities and limited speech.

When we sat our son down at the table, he eyed all the food and immediately picked up his fork. In unison we called out, “Wait, Will, we’ve got to thank God.”

At that Will dropped his fork, tilted his head down and whispered something. What he said we have no idea, but his demeanor was so reverent that when he lifted his head, we looked at each other and said, "Amen!"

A year later I was back at my parents' house for Thanksgiving Day, but this time the house was empty, cold and quiet. My father had died; and my mother, trying to make it alone after almost sixty years, had fallen and fractured her back. I was at the house picking up items to take to her at a skilled care facility.

It was late morning by the time I got to the nursing facility. As I made my way to my mother's room, I passed a woman sitting in a wheelchair in the hallway. "Can you get me to the kitchen?" she asked. "If you can get me to the kitchen, I think I can help." Dementia? Maybe, but even in that strange place, the woman knew where she was supposed to be and what she was supposed to be doing on that morning.

Years passed and I found myself again on Thanksgiving Day visiting my mother in a skilled care facility. This time she was the one in a wheelchair, the one diagnosed with dementia, the one moving toward the end of her life. I said to Mom, "We hope to get you out of here soon and back to your home."

"My home is wherever I am," she replied, "and wherever it is, I just thank God for it." Dementia? Maybe, but she understood that whether we are with family around table, in an empty house, or in the clinical world of health care, in one way or another, we are all pilgrims, sojourners, wanderers looking for refuge, looking for home. But wherever we are, God is with us.

Conclusion

This week wherever you are on the journey, may you feel God's presence with you.

Beside us to guide us, our God with us joining,
ordaining, maintaining, God's kingdom divine;
so from the beginning the fight we were winning;
thou, Lord, wast at our side, all glory be thine! Amen.

*Note: David Lose, "Preaching Thanksgiving," November 21, 2010, Dear Working Preacher, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1514>)