

Sermon Series: Giving Thanks... “Blessings”
Salem United Methodist Church
Matthew 25:31-46; Ephesians 1:15-23; Psalm 100
November 23, 2014
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On Thursday we will indulge in the national pastime of feasting and football. Thanksgiving is a national holiday with roots in the Judeo-Christian faith. Twenty-five hundred years before the Pilgrims gave thanks for their survival on that first Thanksgiving, worship songs were written to offer up thanks and praise to God for blessings. Two thousand years ago the Apostle Paul instructed the church at Thessalonica to give thanks in all things (I Thessalonians 5:18). The past few Sundays we have given thanks for the saints, for the freedom to question God, and for God’s presence in the midst of our suffering. Today we will hold to the tradition of Thanksgiving and offer thanks for our blessings.

The national holiday, Thanksgiving, is not considered a religious or ethnic holiday. We remember the immigrants who landed on Plymouth Rock and survived the extreme conditions of their first winter. Thanksgiving is, also, the only communal and contemplative holiday celebrated by our nation. We are communal in that we gather together with family and friends around a table overflowing with food to give thanks. Before the turkey is cut, many will offer up thanks for something in their lives. In 2014 many families no longer sit at the table to eat together on a regular basis. Our lives are too hectic for family meal time. Also, we seldom give thanks to God for the blessings of the meal before we eat, either. Yet on this one day, this official national holiday, many recognize the value of gratitude. We are grateful for the people that we love, for the riches and freedoms we enjoy. Also, at Thanksgiving we are contemplative. That is, we pay close attention to what we have and are content with it, at least for this one moment in time, at least until Black Friday sales begin on Thursday evening. For many, Thanksgiving offers a time to reach back into their religious roots and offer a prayer of thanks for not only the food, but for their many blessings. Even families, in the midst of a crisis or those who are experiencing some kind of suffering, look for blessings in which they give thanks.

What are blessings? One definition of blessing is a special favor, mercy, or benefit that is received. When we count our blessings, we are examining our lives and seeing what we have been given. From a Christian perspective, we are reflecting on how God has gifted us with special favors, mercies, and benefits. As Christians, we believe that God is the source of all things. God gives us life, family, the ability to work, our homes, and our ability to be a blessing to others. When we give thanks for our blessings, we focus not on being victimized by something beyond our power, but acknowledge that we are recipients of God’s power and grace. Today the church remembers that Jesus the Christ is King. He does not rule by domination or terror. Jesus as the Son of God has dominion over all things. Jesus doesn’t abuse his power, but uses it to love and serve humanity. Jesus seeks justice and has compassion for everyone. Jesus gives us blessings out of his love for us. When we realize this, then, every day is a day of Thanksgiving not just the fourth Thursday of November. Yesterday I served a man named John at the soup kitchen. He called himself Joyful John and said, “When you realize that you have many reasons to be thankful, you are full of joy.” So I asked Joyful John, as I placed a bowl of soup in front of him, “So what are you thankful for, Joyful John?” He replied with a smile, “This warm bowl of soup.” John did not whine that he would be sleeping outside last night or that he was unemployed. He was blessed in that moment by just a warm bowl of soup. He realized it and acknowledged it. As I continued to serve

others, I noticed that the table where Joyful John sat was filled with chatter and laughter. His joy was blessing others. When was the last time you were grateful in the moment for a blessing? When were others blessed by your very presence?

The Hebrew word for blessing is *berakhah*. This word acknowledges that God is the source of all blessings. *Berakhah* refers to faithful people acknowledging God in everyday occurrences and actions. With *berakhah* we are to work at being aware of God in all things: the small and large moments of the day. One rabbi is to have said that we should find at least 100 blessings every day! With this acknowledgement of God's blessings, we are then to offer prayers of thanksgiving. What would our lives, our world look like if each of us acknowledged 100 blessings every day and prayed prayers of Thanksgiving 100 times a day? There are 86,400 seconds in a twenty-four hour day. Do we use even one of these seconds to say thank you to our King who blesses us with everything? Do we use one of these seconds to acknowledge his presence in our lives?

Jesus knew that we struggle with acknowledging gratefulness and acknowledging his presence in our lives. So he challenged us to discover where he is in our daily encounters. He challenged us to bless others with our blessings of resources and time. So he told a story about judgment. It begins with the King sitting on his throne. All humanity from every nation is brought before the throne of the King. The people are separated. Jesus calls the people sheep and goats. Some will go on the left, some on the right. (Before we go any further with this story, this is not the political left or right. So clear that from your minds.) The people were judged by how they shared their blessings with those who were in need of blessings. The King states, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." "You who are blessed by my Father..." They were all blessed! But what did the ones who realized they were blessed do? They gave to those who were in need. They gave to those who were hungry, not only for bread, but for love, too. They gave to those who were thirsty, not for just a drink, but those who were thirsty for acceptance. They gave to those who were naked not only of clothing, but in need of human respect and dignity. They gave to those who were sick, not just from disease, but from sick from the injustices in the world. They visited with those who were in prison, not just those behind bars, but those imprisoned by addictions and grief. They welcomed strangers, not just people they didn't know, but also those who were rejected by the community. They blessed the forgotten ones, the hurting ones, the rejected ones with the blessings they had received from the King. And without realizing it, they were serving, they were blessing Jesus, the King.

And those who hoarded their blessings, those who focused on themselves, those who looked the other way, those who didn't care, what happened to them? How did the King judge them? They received eternal punishment. Those who shared their blessings, what did they receive? Eternal life. At the end of life, we will not be judged by how much money we earned, how many houses we owned, how many cars we had, how many diplomas we earned, how many commendations or promotions we received. At the end of life we will be judged by how we acknowledged the blessings that God gave us, and how we blessed others with them.

We are blessed. We forget that we have enough already. We do not need more, despite what advertisers tell us. At this time of shared contemplation around the altar of a table with a roast turkey as the offering, pray for God to open our eyes so we can see who and what we have. Pray for God to open our ears to hear the affectionate words of the ones who gather with us. Pray for our hearts to be open to sharing our blessings with others. This Thanksgiving, give thanks and thankfully give.

Resources: "Giving Thanks and Thankful Giving" by Greg Paul, www.ministrymatters.com

