

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Meditation for the Interfaith Service of Prayer and Thanksgiving
Held in the Old Broad Street Church on Thanksgiving Day, November 26, 2009
Scripture Readings: Isaiah 5:8-9, Leviticus 23:22, and Luke 6:31-38

GOING BEYOND THANKFULNESS LITE

In a state of awe and wonder, where reason and feeling blend, a psalmist exclaims to God: “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.” Appreciation becomes gratitude, and love of life turns thankfully to life’s Giver.

At first, I planned to call this meditation, “Going Beyond Thanksgiving Lite,” but I’m not really talking about the holiday or joining the annual crusades to take holidays back to their “true meanings.” Rather, I’m hoping to expand our sense of thankfulness itself, as an attitude toward life and way of living it. So, I changed the wording to “thankfulness lite.”

Our reading from the Jewish tradition uses two slices of pie to show how we move from pleasure to satisfaction to genuine gratitude. The first slice of pie pleases, the second satisfies. “Ah, that was good, and now I’ve had enough.” Still missing is the expression of gratitude to the giver, Aunt Rose who baked the pie. But we’re not there yet. Thankfulness is personal and relational. Aunt Rose is not just the baker of delicious pies I need to thank for providing my satisfaction and contented full feeling; she is a person in her own right who has shared something with me for her own reasons. True thankfulness inspires appreciation, not only of the pie and my pleasure in eating it, but of the person, Aunt Rose.

In the name of reverence, religion sometimes depersonalizes God. Why? The underlying reason is our embarrassment with what we call “human weakness,” including the vulnerability of those who love, who care, who let themselves need others. Religion tends to put the Almighty above such “weakness.” The Hebrew scriptures, especially the Prophets, go against this religious tendency by confronting us with the God who loves us and, therefore, desires relationship with us. This is the God who makes covenants and commits to human beings, the creatures of flesh and blood. This is the God who cares that we care and longs for our response. To me, the most amazing thing in the Bible is its insistence upon God’s willing vulnerability to us. Why should God care so much? Why enter into covenant relationships with creatures of dust? Why withhold judgment when we get stubbornly selfish or even cruel? The greatest mystery of all is why God chooses to love us, when no power in the universe could obligate God to give us so much as a second thought. But there we

have it: God cares because God loves, and life – not just biological existence, but life – is a gift from the God who loves us.

What, then, is *thankfulness lite*, and how do we move beyond it? I see or just hear about people who are terribly sick, and so I feel gratitude for my own health, strength, and mobility. That's a good start, and it certainly should lessen my griping about my slightly sore shoulder and the small signs of my having left my youth behind. But where is God in it, and is the terribly sick person any more to me than an object lesson I use to feel happier about my own health? I walk through the halls of a nursing home, hearing the incoherent cries and taking in all the sights and odors. If, rather than dread of growing older myself, I feel renewed thankfulness for every day of life in relative freedom, that's good – as far as it goes. But it does not go far enough.

Thankfulness lite enjoys and feels grateful. I see something that takes my interest, and so I give it more attention. It proves indeed interesting, engaging my mind and my efforts. I may even grow excited as I pursue whatever it offers. Then comes the moment of success when the intensity of my interest relaxes into satisfaction at what I have accomplished or experienced, and I smile. Right there we often stop. *Wow, that was great! I feel so good about it.* Thankfulness lite is gratitude directly corresponding to my enjoyment of the experience: I am grateful for what it did for me. But if I go no further, I am just feeding upon life, filling myself with the pie until my hunger is satiated and I am content. I may even thank God or Aunt Rose for the goodness of life I have enjoyed. But thankfulness lite ends in contentment. Mature thankfulness to God must go further. Why? True thankfulness seeks to respond to God as *my God* – not just to the gift, but to the Giver as the One who loves me. The thankful spirit seeks harmony with God's intent and desire.

At the foot of this pulpit is a box seat that faces the congregation. There stood the presenter who led the singing of hymns by lining out the words. The only instrument allowed was a set of tuning forks to give the pitch. I have read that if you stand up a set of tuning forks, then strike a fork from another set and bring it close, the tuning fork of the same pitch will start to vibrate with the one you struck. The phenomenon is called sympathetic vibration, which is an analogy for what it means to be a prophet but also, I believe, an analogy for what it means to be truly thankful to our God.

We hear much today about spirituality. People say, "I'm not religious, but I'm spiritual." I think what they mean varies greatly from one person to another, but they seem to be saying, "Don't push your religion at me because I have what it takes to satisfy me."

For me, spirituality is sympathetic vibration, resonance, with the Spirit of God, and so while on one hand it brings the contentment of trust in the love that delights in giving us

life and wholeness, on the other hand, it disturbs the equilibrium of selfishness, causing discontent with the way things work in this world, even if they happen to be going well for me personally. If God loved me and me only, then thankfulness could be just a matter of really enjoying those slices of pie until I was satisfied and, of course, remembering to thank the baker. God does love me, but not me only, and God's desire is to create from us a new humanity, not just provide for the old one as it is. Harmony with God's Spirit requires sympathetic vibration with God's desire for justice, compassion, kindness, and peacemaking in the divided communities of our world.

“Ah, Those who add house to house And join field to field, Till there is room for none but you To dwell in the land!” The exclamation “ah” translates a funeral cry for those who restrict their thankfulness in life to what they acquire from others, taking more and more for themselves. God is angry but also grieved, and resonating with God, the prophet voices that anger against greed and grief at the suffering of greed's victims and the fate of the selfish.

Thankfulness lite enjoys life's good things without regard for those denied dignity, meaningful labor, fair compensation, basic security in which to thrive, and equal opportunity to learn, grow, and prosper. Can the child who ate all the cookies, leaving none for sister or brother, thank their mother who baked them with a straight face and expect her to be pleased by such gratitude as that? Is a father pleased with the triumphant glee of the older brother who has beaten up the younger to prove his dominance and get his way? We human beings are all related to each other, not just biologically, but spiritually – because God loves us all and not just some. Leviticus reminds us that God is not pleased with thanksgiving if some are left out. Thankfulness without justice and compassion becomes greed and selfishness celebrating their own satisfactions and pleasures – like the kid who ate all the cookies.

This one is likely to be a long, hard winter for many people right here in Cumberland County. Bridgeton, the Press reported, is in the top 10% of child poverty, not just in New Jersey, but in the nation. In hard times, there is always the danger that fear, frustration, and shame will drive people to seek scapegoats for their anger. People practice anger until it becomes a state of rage. Fear and anger both can be practiced until they become a person's spirit of living or, since fear and anger both thrive in crowds, a society's way of life. Thankfulness also can be practiced until it grows into a generous and compassionate spirit much more in harmony with God's own Spirit. So, let's practice what we preach – literally practice thankfulness, trust in God, and the humble generosity of including and sharing, until they become second nature and we become people whose enjoyment of the life God gives resonates in sympathetic harmony with God's redemptive love for this world. Amen.