

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for Thanksgiving Sunday, November 22, 2009  
Lessons: Isaiah 25:6-9, Deuteronomy 14:27-29, and Matthew 5:23-24; 9:35-38

## MOVING TOWARD COMPLETE THANKSGIVING

As soon as the little boy entered the room where his mother was entertaining guests, he announced with loud voice and beaming face, “Hi, everybody! I’m here!” The guests, including my mother, laughed and talked about how cute he was, this little center of the universe who assumed they were all just waiting for his appearance. He was four years old. What is cute and funny at four is neither at, say, sixteen, and in adulthood becomes pathetic. The very young child needs to be self-centered because he is just learning that he is a self in a world of others and that he has, indeed, a life and will of his own. At two, his favorite words are (and need to be) “no” and “mine.”

And yet we now know that even the very young child does not develop a sense of self by herself but in response to other people. The face to face interaction with caring adults is vital to the child’s learning emotions and empathy. The mother making faces with her baby is playing but also teaching and sharing life. Having given the infant physical birth, she now gives her child emotional birth. Cuddling, smiling, laughing, and going to the rescue with care in those midnight times of distress all matter even more than the parents may realize.

Here’s a Thanksgiving question. A strong sense of self is necessary, but how does it escape the prison of selfishness? It seems to me that thankfulness is a crucial step out of self-absorbed thinking and self-centered living as well as the precondition for happiness. No matter how much I possess and how many pleasures I enjoy, I will not be a happy person unless I am thankful, and I need to thank more than just my lucky stars or my own efforts and abilities. I need to look beyond myself with gratitude for life, love, and all that I enjoy. Otherwise, I will never have enough. As soon as I get what I have wanted, I will want something more. I will measure myself competitively by how successful I am in contrast to others. Have I done better? Do I have more? Can I be proud of myself in the competition of life? Thankfulness that truly looks beyond self with gratitude becomes awareness of grace, and even without doctrine or faith, awareness of grace opens a mind and heart to God.

But on this Thanksgiving Sunday, I need to say that thankfulness is a good start, not a satisfactory finish. We need to take further steps.

If I am indeed thankful for life, am I not thereby looking beyond myself? When I am the recipient of grace, do I not need to ask, “Whose grace?” and, “Why me?” Further, do I not need to look around me and see that others receive life also and wonder how I am related to them? At the very least, do I not need to ponder what it means that we all are in this thing called life together? A man looking at a wretchedly poor child and wondering about that child’s existence was reminded by another man, “His life is as precious to him as your life is to you.” As followers of Jesus, we need to add, “That terribly poverty-stricken child’s life is as precious to God as my life.”

Did you hear the crash? Probably not, because it came from the silent and as yet unrealized collapse of all our personal pretensions and social systems that value one person’s life above another’s, based upon wealth, education, gender, virtue, talent, beauty, fame, or accomplishment. And that’s just the short list of factors presumed to qualify the self-glorifying ego to esteem itself above others.

I’m not suggesting that everyone can do every job equally well. Have you heard me try to sing? Neither am I saying all contributions to society are equal or even that all are positive. I am not denying the value of accomplishment or the advantage to society as well as to the individual from education. Grace is not an excuse for under-achievement. But it does act as a solvent, and some of the things that dissolve in a solution of grace are snobbery, self-righteousness, judgmentalism, oppressive fears, racism and other forms of bigotry, and perhaps most of all the sense of entitlement that makes a person or group of similar people imagine that God created others to serve them, labor for them, do their dirty work, and be grateful for any crumbs returned by the benevolence of their superiors.

Gratitude to God breeds trust in God, even as it levels our notions of superiority and entitlement. Jesus promised the self-exalted would be humbled, and the humble lifted up. But gratitude to God makes that leveling feel okay. I don’t need to outperform you to be on my way toward becoming the person God created me to be and Jesus Christ calls me to become. We can walk together, at least for a while, and in the larger sense, we can all walk together when gratitude to God for life really starts generating trust in God’s care and guidance. Life is about much more than my success and accumulation.

But, even that trust is not the end of the matter. Jesus will not allow us to thank God without caring about our human relationships. “Leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.” God will not accept love or gratitude that does not reach out also to the sister, the brother, the neighbor in our community or world from whom we are estranged. Put positively, love for God generates love for neighbor, and if it does not and will not, then the love for God sours into self-centered spirituality – an idolatry of the religious or spiritual self.

“There but for the grace of God go I.” That acknowledgment of one’s own vulnerability is an important first step in understanding other people’s suffering, addiction, trouble, or downfall. It is not because I am better but because God is gracious that I am not walking the same path or suffering the same distress. The addicted do not deserve their pain and humiliation. They may to some extent bring it upon themselves and need to deal with their actions, but that’s not the same as thinking they deserve what they are getting. And we never know the whole story. We cannot. Neither are we immune to the forces that drive people to self-destructive actions. So, yes, there but for the grace of God go I.

But don’t stop there. When we see poverty, real poverty, does the sight make us grateful for what we have? If so, good. But don’t stop there. When we see people terribly sick, are we thankful for our health? Fine, but don’t stop there.

Jesus drew crowds, but let’s not think of the rock star or the popular evangelist, either. Jesus drew the crowds of teeming humanity still found in the Middle East today. They were not fans of his who paid big bucks for tickets or bought his action figure; neither were they supporters of his cause who purchased dinner seats at \$100 or \$1,000 or more per plate to fund him. They wore no Jesus T-shirts. They were the nameless, faceless throngs of society’s wretched who always needed help. Jesus looks upon them and is overwhelmed, but not with disgust. He does not turn away from their filth, their diseases, their hunger, their ignorance, or their bitterness, either. Matthew tells us that what overwhelms Jesus is compassion. The amazing thing about compassion is that, unlike mere pity, it does not look down upon people but allows itself to enter into and feel their distress with them, as much as one person can with another. We cannot reach God’s depth of empathy and compassion with people who suffer, and we should not pretend to. We can’t know each other that well, but we can be moved by the grace of God in that direction. And we need to be.

Thankfulness is a great start. It can lead to trust and so to less self-driven living and competitive pride. It opens us at least a little to God’s redeeming grace. But thankfulness needs to become relational so gratitude to God opens us to each other. And thankfulness finds its fulfillment, not only in happiness and contentment, but also and even more so in compassion and a hunger for justice and healing in our world. There is a contentment with what we are given in life that is healthful and healing, but there is also a restless discontent with injustice and cruelty that is redemptive. We need both. We need to let our own anxieties control us less even as we let other people’s distresses disturb us more. If spirituality were just contentment or centeredness, there would be no prophets and no Messiah. The Spirit of God calms our fears but also disturbs us with sympathetic vibrations of God’s love for other people and God’s distress at their sufferings. Thankfulness for the gifts of life and love is a good start from which we can go forward. Amen.