

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for Thanksgiving and Stewardship Dedication Sunday
Lessons: Ezekiel 34:11-22 and Matthew 25:31-40

TRUE THANKSGIVING MAKES CHANGES

Stewardship comes from accepting responsibility with the self-understanding of a servant. Thankfulness comes from receiving life as a gift, with the self-understanding of one who is loved and cared for. Together stewardship and thankfulness work to shape, encourage, and guide our life as a congregation and our personal lives as Jesus' disciples.

For stewardship, I used the word *responsibility* rather than *duty*. I know the two words are listed as synonyms, but they have quite different connotations, and the difference matters. Duty is not a bad word, but insufficient for understanding our stewardship. I can fulfill my duty without understanding why. I need only do as I am told or as the rules say. Questioning the *why* of the rules may be deemed impertinent. "Just do it! Don't question, obey!" Responsibility implies thinking and acting *in response to* Jesus Christ, in harmony with his concerns for people and his manner of representing God's love, mercy, and justice to them. Slaves must do as they are told. As stewards, we need to ask questions to learn the *why* of Jesus' ways and internalize his concerns. For me, *spiritual development* is the process of internalizing Jesus' concerns with the goal of becoming, not just his servants, but his friends who know his mind and share it for the sake of the world God loves. True *spirituality* turns us upward toward God and inward toward ourselves to turn us outward. It does not withdraw from the world, except for times of renewal before going back into the world with all its messiness, confusion, and grief. Jesus sends us into the marketplaces where human life is bought and sold on the cheap, into the constant clashes of competing self-interests, and into the places where people withdraw to cry even when they have no tears left.

Thanksgiving – the joy of those who receive life as a gift – is fulfilled as it moves from inward celebration of God's goodness to outward expressions of God's love, mercy, and justice in the service of people for the sake of Jesus Christ who suffered and died for them, whether they know it or not, whether they even care of not.

Ezekiel reminds us that thankfulness enjoyed without concern for justice, especially for the most vulnerable, quickly descends to the low level of joy in self-indulgence. In his imagery, the fat, pushy sheep may rejoice in their ability to bump the weaker sheep aside and take all they want without regard for fairness. In our world where greed is esteemed as a virtue that drives prosperity, such rejoicing in what I myself have taken from life may pass

for thanksgiving, but not in God's eyes. Taking from life without sharing, without providing for the disadvantaged, and without respecting God's love for all, amounts to stealing from life and, therefore, to stealing from God.

Jesus takes us even further along the same road as the prophets. Because the Word, the truth, of God became flesh and united himself in suffering, humiliation, and death with the lowest of humanity, he is, in love's way, incarnate to us in the least of our neighbors – the scorned or ignored, the afflicted or addicted, the uneducated and the unemployed, the objects of disgust or its kindlier twin, pity. He stands with the people the world discounts.

Thankfulness changes the way we see life. When as a church we take food to people in our communities, we are sharing with them, not giving them a handout. We are thanksgiving to our God who loves all of us and provides for us so that we may share. Jesus reminds us that as we regard and treat the least admired and least powerful person, we are regarding and treating him. So, it does us no good to praise him in worship and pray in his name, if we then go out and scorn him in public and speak against him. What Christian speaks against Jesus? Those who speak as though the poor and disadvantaged, the unemployed and underpaid, were the ones dragging our society down. Those who take more and more from people making less and less. Those who take advantage of people's desperation. "As you have done it to one of the least of these, my sister, my brother," Jesus says, "you have done it to me."

Over the years, I have discovered that happiness is not a thing by itself but, rather, something we derive from thankfulness. I could have mountains of wealth and be miserable, dissatisfied, and mean, but I could have barely enough to share and be joyful if I am first thankful for what God has provided. Please don't misunderstand what I am saying here. It has become commonplace for the well-off to preach that the poor can be happy if only they will be thankful for what they have and not jealous of their betters who have more. "Don't tell them they're poor," we are admonished, because telling them the truth will arouse discontent in them and they will no longer be willing to work for the prosperity of others and the crumbs that fall to them from the tables of the wealthy. The myth that the poor and powerless are happier than those who must shoulder the responsibilities of being rich is a convenient self-deception of those who preach it. The prophets and Jesus tell us clearly that God judges a society by the treatment of its most vulnerable, not by the average that comes from having grossly inflated wealth for the few at the top.

Thankfulness changes also our view of what the Bible calls the earth's *goodness* but we modern people tend to call *resources*, as though everything were defined by its usefulness or appeal to us. We even want our birdseed to go to the birds that are pretty to our eyes. Because we have been taught or at least tempted to see all things natural as our resources, we

live with fear of scarcity rather than with joy at the abundance in God's world. So, we are trained to live by taking, sharing only when we have more than we need for ourselves and, maybe, much more than enough. We give what we can spare, rather than what we have to share. Thankfulness, planted more and more deeply within us by the quiet workings of the Spirit of God, changes our perceptions of the world around us and of ourselves in relation to it and to each other. Thankfulness is liberating. It works toward freeing us from fear that comes every time we realize that we cannot control our futures and that some power, natural or corporate, may devise ways to take away from us what we thought was securely ours. That's not to say we should stop fighting the forces of greed and legal larceny, but we need not live in fear, for we trust our God to provide.

Faithful thanksgiving is something we can practice, not only by counting our blessings, but by thanking God through sharing them and learning to delight in that sharing. Thankfulness enables us to enjoy good things without letting them enslave us. Jesus has told us. Without thankfulness and trust, we try to keep life's good or pretty things, and they get eaten by rust or moths; so they wear out without ever being used or enjoyed. Idolatry comes from giving too much importance to things we can possess and so granting them too much power over us. What would we do without them? The practice of giving thanks to God and then sharing what is good works to overcome our temptation to idolatry.

Today, we give thanks to our God with food to share, and also we dedicate to God our pledges of money to finance and encourage our life, mission, and ministry as a congregation of Christ's church – a gathering of people who strive to entrust ourselves to him and fulfill our stewardship of his good news of God's redemptive love. We have to think for ourselves. We need to ask good questions about *how* faith can be honest and life can be true to Jesus. We need each other. We need not only to receive support in our difficult times of life but also to give it in the hard times through which our sisters and brothers must walk. We need to keep reaching out with respect and grace because God loves the world and not just the church. We need to see Jesus in the person we might tend to overlook or turn away from. And we need to forgive ourselves, maybe our parents, and all against whom we bear resentments. We need to give thanks to God and share life with each other. Amen.