

11/18/2012 Thanksgiving Sunday
A Puritan Thanksgiving ©
Rev Seth D Jones

EXPOSITION OF MATTHEW 6:25-34

25“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?

As a country, on Thursday, we will celebrate Thanksgiving, a time of honoring the gifts we have received from the land and from God. As Congregationalists, we hold the holiday in high regard, started as it was by our Puritan forerunners. As the story goes, after the brutal and deadly winter of 1620, when many of the Pilgrims died at Plymouth Colony, the Wampanoag Indians taught the Pilgrims how to farm the local land. The first harvest of 1621 led to the first Thanksgiving feast, attended by the Plymouth Colonists and about 90 Wampanoags. Edward Winslow, a Plymouth Colonist, wrote:

*Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruits of our labor. They four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the company almost a week. At which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and among the rest their greatest king [Massasoit](#), with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five deer, which we brought to the plantation and bestowed on our governor, and upon the captain and others. And although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want that we often wish you partakers of our plenty. (Edward Winslow, *Mourt's Relation*, on Wikipedia page “Thanksgiving (United States)”.*

Thanksgiving became a national holiday in 1863, in the middle of the Civil War.

It is strange to set aside one day out of the year to give thanks for what the Lord has provided to us. It would be better to think of it as a day of awareness, which is intended to shed its light upon every other day of the year, so we might know there is much more to our lives than a daily struggle for survival.

Worry, the projection of suffering into a future we do not and cannot know, rips through our minds and souls and erases the ability to be thankful. Worry is born of the likely possibility, as we engage it, that we will be without at some future point - without food, clothing, life - and for many in our world, this is true. This week, many will go to bed hungry, without enough clothing to face the cold, clinging to a life of struggle and need.

26Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

27And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?28And why do you worry about clothing?

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

30But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

The needs of others are not taken care of when our needs are personally fulfilled. When we are a community of caring, we look upon the suffering of others as our own suffering. To trust in God, to believe that the Lord will provide, and the Lord most certainly does, means we must also see others the way the Lord sees us.

We worry. If you are like me, you worry a lot. It self-perpetuates and feeds upon itself. Worry begets worry. As Jesus says, it is a sign of little faith. In fact, if we are to trust in God, we must admit that worry is directly contradictory to faith in God.

In Luther's Small Catechism, he teaches about the first stanza of the Apostles' Creed, which reads, I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. Luther then says, What does this mean? He answers:

I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my limbs, my reason, and all my senses, and still preserves them; in addition thereto, clothing and shoes, meat and drink, house and homestead, wife and children, fields, cattle, and all my goods; that He provides me richly and daily with all that I need to support this body and life, protects me from all danger, and guards me and preserves me from all evil; and all this out of pure, fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me; for all which I owe it to Him to thank, praise, serve, and obey Him. This is most certainly true.

Do we believe this to be "most certainly true"? I know there are many in this town, perhaps many of you who cannot abide by Jesus saying:

31 Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'

The challenges are often too great. The barriers are too high. The need too crushing. The questions overwhelm us and we can no longer trust a God who gives, who cares, who watches over us. We so easily forget eternal things. We so easily believe our personal, everyday needs are what will satisfy. And so it goes, from one day to the next. Worry following worry. Jesus says,

32 For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.

It would be better to read the beginning of this as saying, "Those who do not believe in God strive for earthly things". We strive for them even though God already knows we need them. Our issue is we cannot accept that God will provide. We cannot follow Paul's call to the Phillipians when he says to them, "Dismiss all anxiety from your minds. Present your needs to God in every form of prayer and in petitions full of gratitude" (Phil 4:6). We strive for earthly things.

33 But those who believe in God strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

If we can trust in a Lord who provides, who watches over sparrows and lilies of the field, we must believe we are worthy of being provided for even as those sparrows and lilies. What is more, we believe that worthiness to be true in everyone we meet. It is in the worthiness we have been endowed with because of

our created being in God, because of what Jesus Christ has restored within us, that we begin to act from a worldview which sees eternal things before we see temporary earthly things. And it is in serving eternal things that we begin to strive for the Kingdom of God and the righteousness which flows from there. When we worry, we lose our ability to strive for eternal things. Worry and eternity cannot exist together, so strive for the things of God's Kingdom and be thankful for a Lord who provides for sparrows and lilies alike.

34“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

The Lord provides and we are thankful. In our worthiness and dignity in the eyes of the Lord, we must remember we are, like the creatures of the land and sea, like the trees and flowers of the earth, like the rivers, streams, lakes and oceans, created beings who are able to live lives of gratitude for what the Lord has provided. Like the animals of land and sea, as the Psalmist says, “We all look to you, O Lord, to give us food in due time. When you give it to us, we gather it; when you open your hand, we are filled with good things. If you hide your face from us, we are dismayed; if you take away our breath, we perish and return to dust. When you send forth your Spirit, we are created, and you, O God, renew the face of the earth” (Ps 104:27-30). Amen.

A Sermon on RECEIVING AND GIVING: GOD'S GRACE, OUR COMPASSION

In this week of Thanksgiving, we will receive much, I hope, in the way of food, family and friends. One of the hardest things for us to do, I believe, is to receive with thanksgiving. Are we able to receive with humility and realize that much of what we have is a gift from God by way of the giving of others? We can only really receive if we understand the source of all that is given to us -- God and Jesus Christ. This morning, I propose that, first, God's grace is the foundation of all we have received, and second, all our acts of compassion are therefore a mirror of the great compassion God has shown us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Let us begin with some verses from Psalm 147:

- 7 Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving;
make melody to our God on the lyre.*
- 8 He covers the heavens with clouds,
prepares rain for the earth,
makes grass grow on the hills.*
- 9 He gives to the animals their food,
and to the young ravens when they cry.*
- 10 His delight is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner;*
- 11 but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him,
in those who hope in his steadfast love.*

The created order itself participates in God's provision to us and all of God's creatures. The natural order is itself an expression of the goodness of God's creation, and that includes you and I. The Lord gives strength to the horse, but his pleasure does not lay there, and nor does it lay in the speed of a runner, but the Lord's pleasure is in that which God has already created. Our hope, then, lies in God's sustaining love throughout all of creation. And it is this hope, in our awe of the created order of things, that the Lord takes pleasure.

Out of this created order come the rains, the fields, the animals, the provision for all who partake in God's creation. We are participants in God's creation, like the animals of the field, like the baby at the mother's breast. It is this natural grace, this natural goodness, that we are giving thanks for this week. It is this we show gratitude for on Thanksgiving Day. We give thanks for our ability and our choice to participate in God's great goodness.

So, just as when we take communion, what we are really receiving when we partake together in the food, the drink and the fellowship of Thanksgiving is God's goodness, which permeates the created order of all things. It is a promise that is *already* given to us and fulfilled, not something we must go out and earn.

Joel 2:26 says: *You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you.*

The Lord is the one who has brought the food we share to the table. The Lord is the one who has brought these people together to share with one another in fellowship and friendship. It is the Lord who invites us to the table.

*Isaiah 55:1-2: Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labour for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.*

When we realize we are indeed participating in the Lord's great goodness, we begin to realize our need for God, for, if we accept that all good things are given to us by God, we come to understand we have a great need for the grace of God in our own lives, spiritually and materially. It is in this realization that we come to understand the great need for the redemptive work of Jesus Christ in the world and in our lives. This is where God's natural goodness in creation crosses over into God's saving grace in our lives.

Titus 3 says: *4But when the goodness and loving-kindness of God our Saviour appeared, 5he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. 6This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, 7so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*

God compassionately brings us to salvation through Jesus Christ. Throughout Jesus' ministry we see incredible examples of God's compassion on others through the healing presence of Christ. Part of this compassion is what Jesus is always trying to teach the disciples. When Jesus comes to the shore in an attempt to find some time to himself, he discovers the crowds have followed him. Not just a few people, not just a couple hundred, but thousands upon thousands. The Gospel of Matthew says, *"When he went ashore Jesus saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them..." (Mt 14:14)*. When the crowd became hungry and the sun started going down, the disciples wanted to send them all away. But Jesus tells them, *"No, give them something to eat" (14:16)*. Jesus is trying to teach the disciples how to have compassion on others. We show compassion by giving of both what we do have and also of what we do not think we have.

God works in the boundary between who we think we are and what we actually need. More often than not, compassion surprises us as much as those receiving the compassion we show. The compassion of God becomes the compassion we show to others. The good works we do with and for one another become a reflection of the grace and goodness God has already shown us in creation itself. We must choose, finally, to participate in God's grace and goodness. We have that opportunity throughout the year and it is only as a reminder that we choose one day out of the year to acknowledge the provision of God.

Paul says, *"...for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:26-29)*.

Through Jesus Christ, we, those of us who have chosen to be baptized and clothe ourselves in Christ, we participate in the compassion of God. We are inheritors of this promise, directly, as much as you inherit anything from your parents and their parents before them. In Christ, we are workers in the restored order of God's great creation, and in that great work, God's compassion becomes our compassion and caring for others. We become creatures defined by God's forgiveness and Christ's love. *Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive*, Colossians 3 says. We do this because, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we have a deep sense of humility and gratitude for what we have been given - the goodness and grace of God's compassion, present even in the simplest things, in the turkey we will eat, in the bread we will share, in the drink we partake and in the fellowship we participate in.

May the Lord bless you and keep you this Thanksgiving. Amen.