

This Sermon was written by Rev. Gary Smith for the First Congregational Church
Thanks-Giving

11-22-20

Ps. 67 & 2 Cor. 9:10-15

I am so sorry that we had to cancel our worship service this Sunday due to the increase cases of the Corona Virus. I enjoy the traditions of First Congregational on this day; not only a joyous worship, but the receiving of our pledges and a lovely dinner together. Thanksgiving Sunday is one of my favorite services, singing some of my favorite hymns, for it primes me for Thanksgiving Day. Of course this year is totally different and for many families they will not be together but they will be in our hearts. Excuse me for complaining. I am sure you, too, have complaints but before we air them, beware of Missouri's Representative Cleaver's whose bill before Congress declared the day before Thanksgiving a complaint free day. If you haven't heard, he received hundreds of complaints over his proposal. The story I read concluded with Cleaver saying, "If you ask people to count their blessings, duck."

Let's face it, for many of our citizens and church members this has been a tough year, with the pandemic, the uncertainty of the economy, concern over the future, and the political upheaval in Washington D. C. and many states. Our plates are full with cares, worries and irritations. Maybe Rep. Cleaver is wrong and we need a day for complaining. Get it out; let it go, so that we can then focus upon our blessings and become thankful. You will recall that a day of thanksgiving has often been called for during and after a crisis. President George Washington following the revolutionary war and President Abraham Lincoln declared the fourth Thursday of November a day to give thanks at the conclusion of the Civil War.

Even its American origin is colored with terrible sacrifice, disease and death. After arriving in the New World, three Pilgrims died the first month, seven the next, sixteen the third. Death continued until by the end of their first winter only half of those who set out for the land of the free were alive. There is much truth in Longfellow's words, "God sifted out 102 (germinating) seeds from the civilization of Europe to plant a new nation on these shores." William Bradford, who became a Puritan Governor, prophesized, "It is not with us as with other men, whom small things can discourage or small discontentment cause to wish that they were at home again." Yet we so often allow small things to discourage and irritate us.

We often times speak of Thanksgiving as if it was original to us. But, the substance of thanksgiving is as old as the Old Testament when the Hebrews would bring their first fruits of the fall harvest to the temple and offer them as a sacrifice to the Creator. It was an important festival to them and was called the feast of Tabernacles. It became so popular that they shortened its name to "The Feast." Doesn't that sound like our Thanksgiving Dinner? Psalm 67 was sung in celebration at the feast, "The land has yielded its harvest and God, our God has blessed us. May the people praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you." That is what we are doing in our worship this morning, praising God for the blessings we have received.

Thanksgiving does change our attitudes. Psychologists tell us that sincere gratitude, thanksgiving, is the healthiest of all human emotions. Hans Selye, who is considered the father of stress studies, has said that gratitude produces more positive emotional energy than any other attitude in life. A thankful heart will endear others to us and us to others. For you see

thanksgiving is not only good for the receiver but also good for the giver. In a sense gratitude is an expression of humility. In Hebrew, the word for gratitude is the same as the word for confession. To offer thanks is to confess dependence, to acknowledge that others have power to benefit you, to admit that your life is better because of their efforts. That frame of mind is indispensable to a civilized society. (The Power of Giving Thanks by Jeff Jacoby)

A few years ago Nick Stinnett of the University of Nebraska conducted a group of studies called the "Family Strengths Research Project." Stinnett identified six qualities that make for strong families. The first quality and one of the most important to be found in strong families was the quality of appreciation. Strong families are strong in part, Dr. Stinnett concluded, because family members express to each other their appreciation for what the other members mean to them, have done for them, and for who they are. Start your thanksgiving by thanking your family, expressing your gratitude to each of them.

One Thanksgiving a family was seated around their table staring at the turkey. It was this family's tradition to express gratitude before eating starting with the oldest down to the youngest. When it was the five-year-old's turn, he began by looking at the turkey and expressing thanks saying, although he had not tasted it, he knew it would be good. Then he thanked his mother for cooking the turkey and his father for buying it but he didn't stop there. He thanked everyone involved in this turkey's life, the grocery store's stock boy who placed it on the shelf, the farmer who fed it, the farmers who grew the feed, and the truck driver who delivered it to the store. He traced the turkey's life from the platter to its origin and finally he asked, "Did I leave anybody out?" His two-year-old brother interjected, "God." The five-year-old replied without delay, "I was about to get to him."

I believe God appreciates our expressions of gratitude. It extols and glorifies him and our thanksgiving endears us to God. It draws us closer to God. The Apostle Paul in writing about those who were enemies of Christianity said, "For although they knew God they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened."

Let us give thanks not only to God the creator who continues the cycle of nature from seedtime to harvest and who is gracious to us bestowing salvation on all who believe in Jesus, his Son. Let us give thanks for God's grace. We sometimes forget the meaning of grace. The Interpreter's Dictionary has helped me in my understanding. It says, "The grace of God is first and foremost evidenced in the incredibly generous and utterly unexpected action God took in coming in Jesus to this world of sinful humans. The grace of Christ is seen in his obedient fulfillment of his Father's gracious purpose, first by becoming man at all, by the humble courtesy of his lowly birth, by the compassion and courage of his life and ministry, by the steadfast faithfulness which lead him to the cross and by the mighty power of his resurrection and ascension and all accomplished for our sake though there was nothing in us that was even faintly worth it."

If you have faced problems this past year and felt the grace of God assisting you, to cope, to have hope, to hang in there and continue on, then pause and give thanks. As Paul expressed it, "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift." (2Cor. 9:15) God bless and keep you in his grace.