

THANKSGIVING SUNDAY, YEAR C, NOVEMBER 20, 2022 LAST SUNDAY OF PENTECOST, CHRIST THE KING

Thanksgiving is well established as a cultural institution in our country. What I mean by that is culturally, it is the inauguration of the “holiday season,” and it’s considered a “high holy day” for retailers and a bellwether of our national economic health.

It is a time for families and wider communities to gather; a day for starting to write up our “holiday” shopping lists; for watching football; for eating, eating, and more eating. Beforehand we say to one another “Have a good Thanksgiving.” And afterward, we ask, “How was your Thanksgiving?” In doing that we have turned the meaning of Thanksgiving into a noun instead of it being a verb. And before it was a noun, Thanksgiving was a verb. It was something that you did. So, as a verb, as a spiritual practice, what is thanksgiving all about?

“What are you thankful for?” We hear that question a lot this time of year, from Christians and non-Christians alike. It seems that human beings know intuitively, at least to some extent, that the privileges and good things we enjoy in life are, to some measure, given to them and that we are to be grateful for what we have. Some thank God, or some sort of deity. Others thank their lucky stars, good fortune, karma, or some nebulous cosmic force at work in the universe. Among all sorts of people the question is asked, “What are you thankful for?” even if it is not entirely clear who it is that is being thanked. And people generally seem to understand that to celebrate the feeling of being thankful and being thankful is good for you.

Giving thanks is actually central to the practice of Christianity. But living thankfully is not essentially about feeling thankful, or even being thankful. To live thankfully is to act on a daily basis to participate in the generous life of God by constantly practicing thanks-giving.

How do we practice thanks-giving? There is an ancient, Biblical tradition that during harvest farmers would not harvest all the way to the edges of a field so as to leave some for the poor and for strangers. In many respects this has translated into a common practice at Thanksgiving for congregations and other community groups to gather food for food shelves, or assist at soup kitchens, perhaps offering Thanksgiving dinner to those who are hungry or alone at this special time. It’s an admirable tradition. My sister Pam is the interim Director of St. Peter’s Haven in Clifton which hosts a food pantry. Yesterday she told me that the 15 grammar schools in Clifton, unbeknownst to her, held a food drive for their food pantry. They are in the process of picking up all the food. In one particular school she said someone must work for Goya because their whole van was filled with Goya products. They still have to pick up food from 8 more schools. I said that should help tide you over for awhile. Her response was it will all be gone by the end of the month. They are serving over 1000 families a month. St. Peter’s food pantry also supplies fresh meat and vegetables and for Thanksgiving they are offering a choice of chicken, turkey breast or turkeys to the families. A new grocery store that just opened in Clifton donated 100 turkeys and she said they’re hoping that might get everyone what they need. This is one small illustration of how great the need is for food.

These donations come from people of all cultures, ethnicities, religious and non religious backgrounds but they know intuitively that giving is good for one’s soul.

People of faith have always known that food, fellowship and gratitude are indeed the most important things in the world. They have always known that fellowship matters. Fellowship acknowledges the bond we share in Jesus - it makes us sisters and brothers, who like blood siblings can disagree and squabble, who can have favorites and be closer to some than others, but who in the end love their family. People of faith have always known that being grateful is a posture in which we live our lives, even when we do not get what we want or deserve, or the days are hard, or the news is bad. Sometimes we just need a little push to remind ourselves there is so much we have to be grateful for.

There is a story of a teacher who asked her students to list the new seven wonders of the world. The students responded with countless number of places that they thought were extraordinary wonders of the world. One student however, seemed to be struggling and the teacher asked what the issue was. She replied, "I can't quite make up my mind because there are so many."

The teacher said, "Well, tell us what you have, and maybe we can help." The girl hesitated, then read, "I think the Seven Wonders of the World are: 1. to see 2. to hear 3. to touch 4. to taste 5. to feel 6. to laugh 7. to love. I think I would add an eighth--to be grateful, and to be able to give thanks. A thankful heart is a wonderful treasure. So, on this Thanksgiving Sunday we give thanks to God for the true gifts of this life. We give thanks for our country with all her faults and foibles, this country which supplies us with so many freedoms, which lavishes upon her citizens so many opportunities. We give thanks for this church and for our community. We give thanks for the spouse we take for granted, the children who dominate our lives, the relatives who sometimes drive us crazy and the friends who love us although we are almost always too busy to see them. We give thanks for the old memories, for those we love that have died but whose souls continue to touch our souls. On this Thanksgiving Sunday we give thanks for all the assumptions of our lives – for food, clothing, shelter, the work we do and the health we enjoy.

Most of us sitting here are so incredibly blessed by life even when life is hard. Oftentimes it is easy to take those blessings for granted. The truth of the matter is we often forget how good we've got it. We forget that these blessing are actually the free gifts of a loving God.

So, as practicing Christians, we are called to move beyond "feeling" thankful; we are called to give thanks by taking very specific spiritual actions: To practice hospitality. To practice generosity. To practice stewardship. To practice compassion. Remember thanks giving is a verb. It's a spiritual practice that runs like a thread through all we do and all we are as Christians. Perhaps it helps to set one day aside in the year when we have the attention of everyone around the nation, to rehearse the importance of being thankful. But we are even more effective when we act thankfully and join in returning the gifts we have received on a daily basis.

Let us recognize that true thanksgiving requires a giving of ourselves. Every day should be thanksgiving on our calendars. A simple petition to remind us is this: God, you have given so much to me, give me one thing more. Give me a grateful heart. On this Thanksgiving week, let each of us remember the true source of our blessings, and let that sense of gratitude invade our hearts and minds and spirits. Amen.