

**PROPER 29, CHRIST THE KING, YEAR A
THANKSGIVING SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 2020**

How many of us practice what I would call Fast Food Gratitude. What I mean by that is we go to fast food restaurants when we don't have the time to sit down and eat or have the time to prepare a meal at home. It's fast, convenient, easy and it's instantaneous. Nutritionally we know it's not the best for our health but we say just this once won't matter till it becomes a habit.

Too often this is how we show our gratitude if we show it at all. We bow our heads and give a cursory thank you to God when it's convenient or have the time. When was the last time you took the time to be truly grateful for what you have and I don't mean just on Sunday's. Saying a quick prayer of thanks when it's convenient or when we think God has answered our prayers is not going to sustain you. Quick spurts of gratitude are not nutritional for our spiritual health.

Isn't it true that a lot of people only think about giving thanks or even being thankful when something wonderful has happened. It's easy to be thankful when a child is born healthy, or you're in remission, or the diagnosis was good or even when your sports team has won. But what about when things aren't going well, you've been diagnosed with cancer, you have lost your job, your child is in trouble. It doesn't even occur to us that this would be a time for gratitude.

A few years back Oprah Winfrey wrote the following in her magazine: "Gratitude comes easily when our lives are in order--when the bills are paid, the children are behaving, our health is good. But our challenges are what bring the chance for transformation. And it is during our deepest pain that we can be most grateful, because we know our hardship will deliver a lesson that refines our character....and when you can give thanks in the midst of your trial, know that you are becoming your finest."

That is not a new sentiment. During the depression, a group of ministers in Boston gathered to discuss how they should conduct their Thanksgiving services. Things were about as bad as they could get, with no sign of relief. The bread lines were depressingly long, the stock market had plummeted, millions were out of work and the term Great Depression seemed an apt description for the mood of the country. The ministers thought they should only lightly touch upon the subject of Thanksgiving since there was human misery all about them.

Dr. William L. Stiger, pastor of a large congregation in the city rallied the group. He said, this was not the time to give a mere passing mention to Thanksgiving. In fact it was just the opposite. This was the time for the nation to get matters in perspective and thank God for their blessings at that moment. Because the most intense moments of thankfulness are not found in times of plenty, but when difficulties abound.

Think of the Pilgrims that first Thanksgiving. Half their number had died, people literally barely surviving but still there was thanksgiving to God. Their gratitude was rooted in hope. They believed that better times were still to come. It was that same sense of gratitude that led Abraham Lincoln to formally establish the first Thanksgiving Day in the midst of national civil war, a time when our nation was struggling for survival. Encouraged by President Lincoln, there was hope for a nation in despair.

During this time of the pandemic we are again in despair. But there is always hope with God because God is constantly creating hope out of despair. With God there are

always possibilities. It's not a Pollyanna type of hope. It is a long sustaining, eternal hope. God's hope is found in the depths of our souls.

So how do we develop a real attitude of gratitude. It seems to me that a biblical understanding of thanksgiving is more an "attitude toward life". Just as our bodies need nutrition so do our souls. Our souls need to be filled with gratitude in order for us to not only live our lives fully but to sustain our bodies. There needs to be an integration of both the body and soul. Just as fast food doesn't give us the nutrition we need, quick cursory thank yous can't nutritionally nourish our souls either. It takes time, patience and understanding.

Cicero once said, "Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others". I believe we're all familiar with the actor Michael J. Fox who has had Parkinson's disease for over 30 years. He is considered by many to be the eternal optimist. He has just written a new book called "No Time Like The Future: An Optimist considers mortality. In it he describes how four years ago his optimism was really tested. He was diagnosed with a benign tumor on his spine that if left would paralyze him. So after undergoing surgery he had to learn how to walk again, graduating from wheelchair, to walker to cane. One thing his doctor's told him was do not fall. Four months after the surgery he was home alone and he fell in his kitchen and shattered his left arm. This event made him start questioning his optimism. He thought he had been too glib and perhaps oversold his optimism. As he said the saying when handed lemons make lemonade was just not working. Instead he felt I'm out of the lemonade business. So it was a journey for him to rediscover his optimism. He has concluded, 'You can be a realist and optimist at the same time. It's about accepting and surrendering. When you accept it, you start to see the other things in your life you're grateful for...You start with things you are grateful for and gratitude will feed your optimism.

When we live thankful lives our whole persona can change. So how can we live more thankful lives? In the gospel today Jesus asks where are the nine he healed? Aren't they thankful like the Samaritan. What the Samaritan was able to do was to look beyond himself and see God's grace. It's what we need to do. Don't just look at misery or failures or mistakes but look at God's grace surrounding us. That's how gratitude starts to take root. Then we need to start practicing gratitude. Probably the most important way to begin is instead of thinking negatively about things that upset you start looking for the positive in things such as:

I'm grateful for the interruptions of phone calls because it means I have friends and family that care and remember those who do not;

I'm grateful for the clothes that fit a little too snug because it means I have enough to eat and remember those who are in need of food;

I'm grateful for the lawn that needs mowing, windows that need cleaning and gutters that need fixing because it means that I have a home and remember those who are homeless;

I'm grateful for all the complaining I hear about our Government because it means we have freedom of speech and remember we are all Americans;

I'm grateful for my heating bill because it means I am warm; and know there are many that are close to losing their homes.

I'm grateful to be alone this Thanksgiving because it means I will see my family next year and remember those who family members who are sick or in the hospital.

I'm grateful when the alarm clock goes off in the morning because it means that I am alive and remember those who have lost family members."

Some other ways to practice gratitude is to recognize the blessings of all your senses. Ask yourself three questions: What have I received, What have I given, What troubles and difficulty have I caused. Think outside the box for new and different ways to be grateful. That is where our "attitude of gratitude" begins.

Ultimately it is realizing that God is with us – in life, in death, in joy and in sadness – in success and in failure – in health and in sickness – in our gatherings and in our alone times – God is with us, because God created us to be in relationship with God. When we allow that to be the foundation of our faith and life, then every moment of every day can be filled with thanksgiving and gratitude.

To live grateful lives in the midst of the stress and mess of this pandemic, to know that we are God's beloved and to give thanks even for those things that test us, these are the makings of real Thanksgiving. Let gratitude wash over us as it will make a good life for us. This year, even if you're by yourself, feast at the table of gratitude for all that has been given you: the good, the bad, the awful and the decent. Be grateful and serve God with gladness. Come into God's presence with a song, which is your very life. May we all have a gratitude filled Thanksgiving. Amen.