

“THANKSGIVING OF THE SAINTS”

Deuteronomy 8:7-18 November 19, 2017

Thanksgiving in America: There may be a chill in the air, and even some snowflakes falling. The days are shorter. Trees are bare. Winter is coming. And Christmas is just around the corner.

Family arrives at your house that day, or perhaps the night before. A few of you have already plotted who will go where today or early tomorrow for Black Friday sales. Others have staked out your place on the sofa or claimed your recliner to watch the parades and the big college football games. Others are huddled in the kitchen, preparing the turkey and all the fixings.

Mealtime comes, and the ritual of giving thanks begins. Maybe everyone says one thing he or she is grateful for. Maybe one person offers a prayer or a speech expressing gratitude for the whole gathering. Or maybe you just stand around the table for a moment of silence before sitting down to the feast.

Or maybe that's what used to happen. Or maybe that has never happened. Maybe now there are many people, but no central gathering. People come and go, serve themselves as they can each wandering off in their differing directions. Or maybe now it's just you, or you and one or two others. Or maybe you are a plus one at a gathering you've not been to before. And instead of cozy and welcoming, it all feels unfamiliar, uncomfortable, or even sad and lonely. And instead of looking forward to it in any way, you just want to get through it and on to another day.

Or maybe you're in the hospital, or in the nursing home, with a family member or a loved one or a patient you are caring for. Or maybe you are the patient. Or maybe you're in a prison, or a detention center, whether you work

there or live there. Maybe there will be some semblance of a Thanksgiving Day observed where you are, and maybe not. Or maybe this is just another day on the streets, except for the increased number of places where you can get a hot meal today, but it'll be back to normal (except maybe for the turkey leftovers) tomorrow.

Or maybe you're working today, whether for overtime pay or not, in a restaurant or a grocery store, and you've been gearing up all week and maybe even today, producing way more turkey and dressing and cranberry sauce and potato salad than usual. Or maybe you're bringing people into or working at the emergency room. Or you work in retail, and your store starts Black Friday today, and you will have spent the whole day and much of the past two weeks getting your inventory and your attitude ready for the sudden rush to come. What you do makes a "big day" possible, for others, but maybe not so much for you.

Where will you find yourself this Thanksgiving? What will it be like for you? What will it be like for the people you see in worship, or the grocery store, or the emergency room, or the police or fire department, or the hospital, or on the streets? What will it be like for those you don't usually see, or those you see but rarely think about?

Now I'm going to give you a few moments of reflection and/or prayer.

So that's Thanksgiving as those of us here in the United States have come to know it. But there's a deeper level of Thanksgiving that all of us are called to as the people of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the people of a God who gathers people from everywhere and seeks to save us all, and save us to the uttermost, a God known to Christians as Holy Trinity—or as we have most commonly put it, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, One God now and forever. I'm talking about the Thanksgiving of the saints.

The pattern for that deeper level of Thanksgiving is found in the annual harvest ritual God called the people God brought into the promised land to observe long ago. It's found in Deuteronomy 26. It's the same fourfold pattern that underlies the Great Thanksgiving we pray every time we gather at the Lord's Table. The gifts, in this case the first fruits of the harvest, are presented to the presider before God, and the priest **takes** them. The people are led in a prayer of thanksgiving that **blesses** God and confesses our identity as being among those whom God has been saving since the time of Abraham (or before). The Priest offers it on the altar before God. Then the priest **breaks** or divides it, so all present can **share** in it in a meal of thanksgiving that creates a larger collection of food that continues to support others who are needy beyond just that meal.

TAKE. BLESS. BREAK. SHARE.

This was the annual ritual, every year at harvest time. The timing of the American Thanksgiving ritual was chosen to correspond roughly with harvest time, at least for some of our crops, as well. And the vision for the American Thanksgiving is also linked to a sense of supporting one another—at least as friends and family, if not also the widow, the orphan, and other people in need, as in the Biblical prototype.

But Joshua it makes clear that our God intended God's people, the saints, to offer thanksgiving not just once a year, but as an ongoing, regular practice. It would not be enough simply to follow the commandments God had given them. They needed to remember that any wealth or good fortune they may wish to say they gained for themselves was precisely because God had provided the means for them to do so. And in that process, they needed to remember what God had done for them, and offer their whole lives in grateful response to that.

The annual offering of first fruits was one concrete reminder for the whole nation. But the call to remember and live in gratitude was to each family and each individual in it.

This is why Christians celebrate Holy Communion frequently and why John Wesley expected the people called Methodist to celebrate Communion as frequently as possible, and preferably at least weekly. And this is why the Great Thanksgiving, the Thanksgiving of the Saints, has the same basic shape, the same fourfold pattern, as the annual Harvest Thanksgiving Festival God established for God's people long ago. We **TAKE** bread and wine to the Lord's Table. We **BLESS** God for all that God has done to save us, for making us God's people here and now, and for all that God will do to renew the whole universe. We **BREAK** the bread, and then we **SHARE** it so all receive of the bounty of the body and blood of Christ.

TAKE. BLESS. BREAK. SHARE.

Like that first biblical thanksgiving. And this thanksgiving, the Great Thanksgiving, is at the heart of the thanksgiving that is to inform our daily lives as Saints, here and now.

God's first saints were called to remember that their God was the one who brought them out of slavery and oppression in Egypt, who led them through the wilderness for forty years, and finally brought them into a new land where they could settle and prosper. All of that would be easily forgotten if they started to believe they were supporting themselves and did not remember how God had rescued them and their ancestors, sustained them, and brought them to this place.

This is why we remember all of this, in addition to the story of the ways Christ has rescued us from the power of sin and death, every time we gather

around the Lord's Table, and in remembering, give thanks.

I came across a little story while I was preparing today's message and I would like to share it with you.

One afternoon a shopper at the local mall felt the need for a coffee break. She bought herself a little bag of cookies and put them in her shopping bag. She then got in line for coffee, found a place to sit at one of the crowded tables, and then taking the lid off her coffee and taking out a magazine she began to sip her coffee and read. Across the table from her a man sat reading a newspaper.

After a minute or two she reached out and took a cookie. As she did, the man seated across the table reached out and took one too. This put her off, but she didn't say anything.

After having a couple of sips of coffee she once again took another cookie. So did the man. She was really upset by this—especially since now only one cookie was left. Before she could say anything he took it, broke it in half, offered half to her, and proceeded to eat the other half himself. Then he smiled at her and, putting the paper under his arm, rose and walked off.

Was she steamed. Her coffee break ruined, already thinking ahead of how she would tell this offense to her family, she folded her magazine, opened her shopping bag, and there discovered her own unopened bag of cookies.

I like that story—it makes me think about how well God treats me even when I am not treating him well or thinking all that kindly about him. It also makes me appreciate what I have or act like I know where it has come from. It serves as a kind of reminder to me—like that reminder we've been talking about from our old testament reading. It speaks of how everything we have is a gift from God, a gift worked upon by our hands, most certainly; a gift perhaps even enhanced by our strength, but a gift none-the-less, for God gives us the hands we

need, and God gives us the strength we have. Would that I would remember this at all times—it would make my life so much easier, and it would bless everyone around me, and it would bless God...

Now we are going to take some time to share something you are grateful for. I will come out into the congregation and as each person shares, we will follow with a response of “Thank you, Lord.”

Thank you for that heartfelt sharing. We give thanks everyday, not only with our lips and in our lives, for God’s goodness and loving kindness toward us and all whom God has made. We give thanks for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life. But above all, we give thanks for our redemption in our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace, including the Great Thanksgiving, and of the hope of glory.

So wherever you are this Thanksgiving, however this day may be for you in other ways, take time yourself, or with those with whom you may gather, but remember, that day, and every day, the thanksgiving of the saints:

**Almighty and most merciful God,
Give us such an awareness of all your mercies
That with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise,
Walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**