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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church

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Deuteronomy 26:1-10

John 6:25-35

In this season of Thanksgiving, dear God, we have so much for which to be thankful: friends, families, love that surrounds us, for life itself, and for you. We have been so richly blessed in so many ways. Now, in this time together, may we hear your voice, listen to your truth, and have the courage and faith to live by them. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

“Thanksgiving”

Macy's Department Store is famous for presenting the Thanksgiving Day Parade (which going to see is on my bucket list). But now the same store, in its 87th year of producing a nationally-televised parade, watched by millions, is being blamed for ruining the holiday.

What has the store done? It's decided to open its doors to shoppers on Thanksgiving Day at 8:00 p.m. *Time* magazine reports that people are denouncing the move as "greedy, misguided and unfair to the employees being forced to work on a day traditionally reserved for family."

"Please write an obituary because I think this death needs to be acknowledged," one person said after hearing Macy's decision. "It is the death of Thanksgiving."

But Macy's isn't the only store open on Thanksgiving. Kohls and JCPenney will be open, and Toys R Us starts cranking at 5 pm. Walmart and Target will also open on Thanksgiving so you can buy that 32" LCD TV for \$98 you've been eyeing. As *Time* said, "This year it will be perfectly possible to spend all of Thanksgiving assaulting your local shopping mall in search of Christmas presents for family members you are giving short shrift to on Thanksgiving itself. We are indeed blessed. And this year the whole event is a bit ecumenical, too, since Hanukah falls on Thanksgiving . . ." ("Time to Surrender in the War on Thanksgiving, *Time Magazine*, November 20, 2013)

After all, *Time* magazine concludes, "This is a nation that honors its war dead with Memorial Day automobile tent sales. Let's not stress over the loss of Thanksgiving. You want to hit the mall, go ahead and don't feel the least bit guilty about it."

And if I may add, don't be embarrassed to admit it, either. I stood here about a year ago this time and publicly admitted that I went to Walmart on Thanksgiving night, and I didn't even have anything to buy. I just went to see what the fuss was all about. So let me give some advice, in case you're considering some Thanksgiving shopping after your pumpkin pie: don't. It is as crazy as the pictures portray it to be.

But despite the hoopla around Thanksgiving shopping, I hear more and more from people that Thanksgiving is their favorite holiday. It's the least commercialized-there are no gifts to purchase, wrap or mail; no Thanksgiving cocktail parties to attend (unless you count all of the families you need to go visit); and no seasonal music. It's really quite remarkable that the retailers haven't found a way to commercialize it, save for the stores opening early, which you can choose to boycott.

In many ways, it is the quintessential American holiday. Sure, Norman Rockwell has idealized the event. But it truly is an *American* holiday, born from our founding fathers and mothers, whose first winter here was much more harrowing than Walmart will be this Thursday night.

Half of the hearty souls who left Plymouth and sailed to Holland and then picked up stakes again and sailed across the Atlantic to New England died after one year in the new world. All but three families dug graves in the rocky soil of New England to bury a husband, wife, or child. They had brought plants and seeds with them on the Mayflower, along with provisions for the first winter. But the barley they planted did very poorly, and the peas failed altogether. Starvation was real. It was the corn, given to them by the natives, that saved them from starvation: two pounds per day per person for the critical second winter is what they had. Their Governor Bradford wrote in his journal, "The whole country, full of woods and thickets, represented a wild and savage hue; if they looked behind them there was the mighty ocean. What could sustain them but the spirit of God and his grace?"

They were, of course, people of the Bible, Puritans who were seeking a place to practice their faith in freedom without persecution. They knew about ancient Israel's harvest festival, how Israel, at the end of a successful harvest, thanked God for the bounty of creation—and also for delivering them from their captivity, giving them their freedom as a people.

That is the biblical root of Thanksgiving. The Pilgrim fathers and mothers read their own story in Israel's older, ancient story, such as the one we heard from Deuteronomy. God is thanked for the harvest, but also for something more, something not actually dependent on a successful harvest: namely, God's presence and grace and love. The Pilgrims thanked God for enough corn to survive the winter. But they also thanked God for the guiding presence they had experienced, the strong hand they had felt leading them, and the love that had sustained them through lonely, cold, dark nights, even as they were burying their loved ones.

The Pilgrims understood that God is to be thanked and praised regardless of what is going on around us—in good times and not so good times. And that is the biblical witness as well.

But if you listen to some well-known and widely popular TV preachers, you'd think that the Biblical witness is something entirely different. You'd think that the only time God is to be thanked is when things go right. And those TV preachers would have you believe that the only way to know if you are truly blessed is by the amount of shiny toys you have.

One popular TV preacher was interviewed on National Public Radio a few years ago. After the pastor talked about his books and sermons, the interviewer pointed out there was almost nothing in his preaching and writing that had to do with God, or theology, or Christ or death and resurrection. The interviewer said, "It seems to be mostly pop psychology with a Bible verse attached." And all the preacher could think to say was, "Well, what I teach them helps people."

Well, it may help them in the short run because it makes people feel good, but in the long run that theology becomes very problematic, because the premise behind it says that the more blessed you are, the more stuff you have. Vice-versé, if you don't have much stuff, you aren't very blessed.

It's awful theology that is, unfortunately, becoming the American gospel. But it's not at all Biblical, and it's not very American, either.

The Bible gives witness to Job, who got on his hands and knees and praised God after his children died.

Psalm 100, what we sing every week as the Doxology, praising God from whom all blessings flow, was written by people who had precious little to be cheerful about.

The hymn “Now Thank We All Our God” was written amid the darkness of the Thirty Years’ War by German pastor Martin Rinkart, who is said to have buried 5000 of his parishioners in one year. His parish was ravaged by war, death, and economic disaster. In the midst of that darkness, he sat down to write a table grace for his children: *Now thank we all our God/with hearts and hands and voices/who wondrous things had done/in whom His world rejoices/who from our mother’s arms/hath led us on our way/with countless gifts of love/and still is ours today.*

Here was a man who knew thanksgiving comes from love of God, not from outward circumstances.

And the American witness of the Pilgrims, who sat down for their Thanksgiving after witnessing the deaths of half the people they sailed over here with, teaches us that gratitude doesn’t stem from how much stuff we have. Real gratitude, profound gratitude, does not depend on what we possess or how good our lives are at any given moment. Gratitude is about recognizing God’s grace and love and presence.

We forget that, I think. But I was reminded of it on Friday, when I attended a funeral. A man I know through presbytery work, his daughter died of cancer. She was 59. At her funeral, there weren’t existential questions about how or why God could or would take someone at the age of 59. There was only praise for God, and the wonderful things God has done. And in no way was that message meant to belittle the family’s grief, nor was it received that way by them. It was meant to uplift them, and remind them that God is to be praised for the gift that woman’s life was to all who knew her and loved her.

But we forget, I think, that being thankful doesn’t stem from how much we get, or how much we don’t, but stems from God who is worthy of our praise every day, all day. Donald McCullough writes: “When we express gratitude, we experience, however fleeting and brief, a moment of contentment. When we say thank you, we heave a sigh of satisfaction in a world grasping. Instead of reaching out toward more, we pause to enjoy what we have.”

A group of us have been keeping a gratitude journal in November. A couple times a week, I e-mail them an encouraging word or thought. A couple weeks ago I shared with them a [great article](#) that talks about how it’s so easy to concentrate on the negative things in life and focus on what we don’t have. Our default mode is to focus on the things that go wrong, not the things that go right. We complain about the weather, how busy we are, how little we slept, the traffic, a family member, a friend, our jobs . . . you get the picture.

But part of what I’ve been trying to do with the journal keeping, which the article points out, is reprogram my brain. Because let’s face it, in the big scheme of things, I really have very little to complain about, and so much to be grateful to God for. I have a great husband, 4 beautiful kids, a great church/job, friends, and soon a new kitchen! *I should not be complaining.* Which doesn’t mean everything is pie-in-the-sky-rosy every day. We all have our bad days and problems. But I want to live life in the affirmative praising God from whom all blessings flow regardless of whether the day is good or bad. How about you?

On the sign this past week, we've had two messages. The first is a quote from John F. Kennedy which reads:

"As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them."

The second one is, "Thanksgiving is not a day, but a way of life."

Live a life of gratitude today and every day, no matter what the day may bring, for in doing so you are living your faith and thanking God from whom every blessing flows.

Amen.

Sources:

"Hold to the Good", the blog of John M. Buchanan, for his thoughts on Thanksgiving, the Israelites, and history of the Pilgrims journey here.

www.lectionarylab.com, for the quote about the NPR preacher.