

A GRATEFUL HEART
Post Christian and Presbyterian Churches
Deuteronomy 26: 1-11
November 22, 2009

In a sermon entitled, “**Doxology**,” (November 24, 2002) John Buchanan, the eloquent pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago said one of his favorite illustrations of thanksgiving came from a Tonight Show interview that Johnny Carson did with the famous baseball pitcher, now prominent baseball analyst, Orel Hersheiser. “In 1988, the Los Angeles Dodgers won the National League Championship and the World Series. The Dodgers had a great pitcher by the name of Orel Hersheiser, a mild-looking young man whose nickname was "Bulldog" because of his fierce competitiveness. In 1988, Hersheiser won about every award a pitcher can. He pitched 63 consecutive scoreless innings, still a record. In the World Series, he started and won several games. Orel Hersheiser was the Most Valuable Player and the toast of the baseball world.

After winning the World Series, Orel Hersheiser was a guest on the **Tonight Show**. Johnny Carson was interviewing him and Johnny asked how Hersheiser seemed to stay so calm, steady and focused in those incredibly tense, pressured situations, out there on the

pitcher's mound, alone, with 50,000 screaming fans and millions of people watching on television. Hersheiser's answer stunned Carson. "I sing a hymn," Hersheiser said. "I'm a Presbyterian and so I sing a hymn to myself out there that we sing every Sunday in church." Carson was momentarily speechless and then asked if Hersheiser would sing it and he did. And what he sang was the Doxology: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise him all creatures here, below. Praise him above, ye heavenly hosts. Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost." When Orel Hersheiser was singing this hymn, he was giving thanks to God and centering himself in the grace and care of our loving and generous God.

We will gather this week to celebrate Thanksgiving—probably the one American holiday that remains relatively untouched by the marketplace. We don't have to buy new clothes or presents, send cards, or attend festive parties. All we have to do is cook lots of delicious traditional foods, spend time with loved ones, watch football, and say "thank you."

The Catholic priest, Henri Nowen, kept a journal while traveling and working in South America one year. The entry for November 26 reads:

Thanksgiving Day! There is probably no day I liked so much in the United States as this day. In many ways it struck me as a more spiritual or religious day than Christmas: no commercial preparation, just a coming together to express gratitude for life and for all the blessings we have received. I am more and more convinced that gratitude is one of the most important of human emotions.

I spent much of my growing up years in the care of my two dear grandmothers who very much regarded gratitude as a duty. They both emphasized the importance of being polite and expressing thanks when I had received a gift or someone had done something special for me. Both of them were good letter writers and stressed the importance of always sending well-written thank you notes. I hear them even now encouraging me to be more prompt in writing thank you notes and often I fall short in teaching my children this valuable lesson.

Thanksgiving is perhaps the simplest expression of our faith and the most important human emotion we learn to express. Saying “thank you” is one of the earliest things we learn to communicate. How often as parents do we say to our children when we give them something, “now what do you say?” Don McCullough, President

of San Francisco Seminary and the author of the book, **Say Please, Say Thank You** 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.”

It is essential that we busy, preoccupied, stretched too thin, self focused human beings be reminded that we need to be thankful and gracious people in order to be fully human. I tell my children often that I am not raising entitled little prim-a-donnas and rather than grabbing for more, we need to be more content with what we have. I believe we miss something essential, important, and most beautiful if we do not learn and cultivate the practice, the habit, and the everyday attitude of thanksgiving. God wants us to be grateful, not for God’s sake, not because God particularly needs our gratitude, but for our own sakes because we need to be grateful.

John Buchanan said, “The praise of God which is the source of our joy is not pollyannish, nor sentimental, nor trivial. It is not only because we happen to have an abundance of food and shelter and clothing and material comfort. Of course we are grateful for what we have but it is far more important than that. It is for the miracle

of God's grace, for life renewed each morning, for dear ones to love, for God's goodness and mercy in Jesus Christ, and for the blessings of each common day. The gratitude that brings the deepest meaning to our scattered lives transcends the moment and encompasses the mystery of life and the greater mystery of God's love and presence with us always. While Anne Frank was hiding from the Nazi's who would later kill her and her family, she wrote in her diary on her last Hanukkah these words: "We have so much for which to be thankful. Let us praise God!"

"Gratitude is a way of looking at the world. And when it is that, it is not dependent on having an abundance of things for which to give thanks. In fact there is something about authentic gratitude that expresses itself most eloquently in the midst of adversity and trouble. The Pilgrims, those hearty souls whose Thanksgiving feast we commemorate every year, were not celebrating abundance. Half of their number had died after one year in the new world. All but three families had dug graves and buried children, husbands, wives, fathers, mothers. The seeds and plants they brought with them did poorly. Starvation was a real possibility. It was corn, given to them by the natives that saved them from starvation. 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?’ The Pilgrims knew the biblical story of God’s providence and grace to Israel, God’s promise of love in good times and not-so-good times, God’s grace given in Jesus Christ for all people regardless of worldly circumstance.” **(Excerpt from John Buchanan’s sermon entitled, “ Song of Thanksgiving” that was delivered on November 21, 2004 at the Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago)**

On this special holiday, we are reminded that gratitude is so much more than a social obligation and seems to be the only faithful response to God’s presence with us in the highs, lows and ordinary in-betweens of our living. When Jesus tells those that he healed, “Get up and go on your way: your faith has made you well,” Jesus is acknowledging that faith and gratitude are closely connected. While gratitude is definitely a choice, if we want to experience salvation and wholeness in our relationships and in our living, then gratitude is not an option. There is something that is life-giving about gratitude. I know a widow who plants a new rosebush on her church’s property every year on the anniversary of her marriage. This is her way of saying thank you for the 42 years of marriage she experienced before her dear husband’s death. This woman chooses to celebrate the love and the life she shared with her husband and for her, gratitude has become the best way for her to deal with her grief. She knows that being grateful does not diminish the pain of

her sadness but it does take away the spirit of bitterness and resentment that can corrupt the human heart.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, commenting on that wonderful phrase in the Twenty-Third Psalm, “My cup runneth over,” says, “Gratitude is more than remembering to mumble ‘thank you.’ It’s more than a ritual of politeness. Gratitude is a way of looking at the world that does not change the facts of your life but has the power to make your life more enjoyable.” Kushner illustrates the difference by sharing the wisdom he has gained from his aging body: “Each night as I prepare for bed I put drops in my eyes to fend off the threat of glaucoma that would rob me of my sight and take from me the pleasure of reading. Each morning at breakfast, I take a pill to control my blood pressure, and each evening at dinner I take another to control my cholesterol level. But instead of lamenting the ailments that come with growing older, instead of wishing I was as young and as fit as I once was, I take my medicine with a prayer of thanks that modern science has found ways to help me cope with those ailments. I think of all my ancestors who didn’t live long enough to develop the complications of old age and did not have pills to take when they did. (**The Lord Is My Shepherd, p. 154**)

A few years ago at this time in November, I was asked to speak to the Senior Adults at First Methodist Church for their annual

Thanksgiving luncheon. I was asked to talk about the theme of thanksgiving and my work at Hospice of Lubbock. After much pondering, research and fretting, I decided to share with them why I am thankful for my work with the dying. I began by sharing with them that I learned early on how much life is a gift. We are not rewarded with more life if we are good, ethical, generous, or religious people. The rain falls on the just and the unjust and as Abraham Lincoln once said, “the life in our years is of greater value than the years in our life.”

After that, the majority of my talk at First Methodist focused on how grateful I am to be able to witness and acknowledge the faith that is forged in difficult times and flourishes in the ruins of our lives. When I am invited into the home of a 17 year old basketball player at Coronado High School with bone cancer, a 45 year old special education teacher at Rush Elementary with a brain tumor, or an 89 year old farmer with bladder cancer who lives with his wife of 63 years in the country beyond Morton I am reminded at a gut level that God does not spare us from turmoil but rather strengthens us for turmoil. A woman whose family had suffered a most dreadful tragedy wrote, “I have learned not to hold back love. . . . You don’t waste time being afraid when you realize how brief life is. You try to live each day, she says, as a precious gift of

God.” (Jeanne Bishop, in **Religion and the Death Penalty**, p. 267)

One of our most familiar and meaningful Thanksgiving hymns is entitled, **Now Thank We All Our God**. It is one of the more joyful hymns of our Christian tradition; a hymn steeped in praise and shaped by gratitude. In the October 2004 edition of **Lectionary Homiletics** I learned that this hymn was written by a Lutheran pastor in Germany who served his congregation during 30 years of devastating war in the 1600’s. During those thirty years, half of Martin Rinkart’s parishioners died from the ravages of war or from the catastrophic plagues that swept Europe. In those 30 years, Martin Rinkart performed over 4000 funerals and yet somehow, he was able to hold onto the wholeness of life and continued to affirm a life of goodness in the midst of horrendous circumstances. During those 30 years, Rinkart wrote 66 hymns, most of them hymns of praise and thanksgiving, including his most famous one, “**Now Thank We All Our God.**”

Through all those dark years, this man of hope and gratitude, offered up a sacrifice of thanksgiving “with heart and hands and voices.” Though he prayed for God to “free his country from all ills,” that prayer was never answered in his lifetime. Rinkart was not able to free his people, he did all he could to keep them alive

and to ease them gracefully into death. Martin Rinkart paid attention to the presence of God in his midst and even in the grave darkness, Rinkart was able to write,

“Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices, Who wondrous things hath done, in whom this world rejoices.”

PASTORAL PRAYER

Great God of life, love, and hope,

We gather together on this day with an awareness of our need for the things in life we can't get anywhere else but in your midst with other fellow strugglers in the faith. We come seeking for love and grace, for community and direction, for healing and forgiveness, and for a closer relationship with you. If we are honest with ourselves and with you, O God, we must admit that we often find it difficult to experience you in our present everyday situations. The noise of our busyness, the distractions of our pain, fears, and motivations, and the clutter of our everyday lives all hinder our openness to the unexpected surprises of love and our availability to the affirmations of life you seek to give to us here and now.

As we pause this week to give thanks for all that we have, we are reminded that our openness and availability to you is more important than what we have or what we leave or give away, or

even in what we do. Whether our past has wounded us, whether our future scares us, or whether or not we succeed or fail in our present work and relationships, our openness to you reminds us that we are loved and cherished and that you, O God, will be with us in the good times, in the difficult times, and in the ordinary in between times. Come to us again this day, and startle us with how much you care, how much we are loved, and how much you have to give to us here and now. We give heartfelt thanks for the new lives of Luke and Jacob and pray that they would grow strong in your grace and that their little lives would remind us of the circle of life and love which holds and sustains us all.

We pray that because of your generous love to us, our thankful hearts and blessed lives might enable us to be extensions of your light, your grace, and your presence to those who live in darkness and experience much pain, chaos, and suffering. May all our loved ones experiencing grief, illness, despair, and hurt know your presence with them and experience glimpses of wholeness and healing in the midst of their anguish. On this day, at this time, enable us all to be more open, more ready, and more thankful to the God of all life, hope, and love. As children of God's promise, let us pray together, "Our Father, who art in heaven..."

