

Thanksgiving 2018

Joel2:21-27; Psalm126; Timothy2:1-7;
Matthew6:25-33

I start out thinking I'm pretty good at this Thanksgiving thing.

I mean, I'll sit down at a big table tomorrow with the company of good people and enjoy the food. For my busy weeks, it's a pause that will make me relax and not rush around quite so much. I could almost tell myself that I've figured out what life is about, at least for the day.

Sure, it may not turn out perfectly. For some reason my mom even decided cooked carrots should be part of it, and I won't be thankful for those. I'll also look around the table and notice people who *aren't* there, and I'll mourn some loss and have to confront some absence. It's not that everything is just right. I'm not claiming any quintessential picturesque embodiment that's exactly what life is supposed to be in America. I'll be balancing sorrow and maybe even discouragement along with happiness. But on the whole, for the day, I'll try not to focus on those things and will put my thumb on the scales of the good outweighing the bad.

Plus, I'm not so confined only to see what's in front of me. I'll manage to extend my appreciations. I'll be thinking of my CSA farmers, Tony and Dela, as I cook the Brussels sprouts they struggled to grow for me in a changing climate. I'll be cherishing the premier place of our state as I eat cranberries from the farmers' market. As a usual vegetarian making an exception, it's apparent to notice the turkey that's given its life for me, though I'll know next nothing of just what that life may have been like. Still, I'll keep appreciating it through the leftovers on a roll with some brown mustard. Heck, I may even find gratitude for the work of sugar-hungry yeast in fermentation. So just by looking down at my plate and into the bottom

of an empty glass, I'll have the impetus to realize my thanksgiving isn't self-contained but required broad involvement of people and creatures.

You know, I'll even put on a necktie to look good and mark it as a genuine celebration. It may not be perfect, but plenty sufficient, plenty good enough. Yes, I'll be pretty assured that I'm doing well at giving thanks. I know what I'm going to wear for the occasion, and have plans on my food and my drink...

But then along comes Jesus, saying "Don't worry about what you'll eat or drink. Don't worry about what you'll wear." Well, Jesus, that was *most* of what I *was* worried about, and aside from that I hardly know where to start for Thanksgiving! He goes on, "Doesn't life consist in more than these things?" I don't know, Jesus! Does it?! I wasn't preparing to pay attention. Yet Jesus prompts me to be a little less self-satisfied. If I'm thinking I'm pretty good at this Thanksgiving thing, I'll need something besides a full belly, probably even more than pitching in on the dishes afterward.

So maybe it's in the conversation and discussion around the table. For that, our reading from 1st Timothy makes a bold suggestion: that our Thanksgiving ought to be political. Well, just out from election day, you may feel still be overloaded on politics. At my table, there's a chance my mother will voice relief at all the SuperPAC ads being off her TV. There won't be heated dialogues or diatribes, but at most some political snickering or poking fun.

But 1st Timothy will have none of that. Before the oven is heating up, before the shopping list is even made, this pushy little book of the Bible tells us "first of all" we should make "supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings" for all in high positions. Foremost is thanks for government, according to this scriptural suggestion.

Well, this *is* a national holiday, declared by presidential proclamation. So to shape my supplications and prayers, I generally go back to the formative 1863 statement from Abraham Lincoln, who adjoined us to set apart “a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent” God. (I like his proclamation mostly for that term “beneficent.”) Lincoln concluded with the difficult political recommendation “that while offering up” our prayers for blessing, we might “also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to [God’s] tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers ... and fervently implore [God] to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore ... the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquillity and Union.” That’s not just in Civil War, but still worth hearing, amid civil strife where too many are harmed and we are terribly disjoined.

This prompts hearing from Joel, that we’ve known ravages, but don’t fear those as the end of the story. We can give thanks even when plates haven’t been full and death has left empty places at our tables. We expect soils and plants will rejuvenate, that God’s will is to restore life.

Thanksgiving isn’t only in what satisfies my stomach, nor disabled in spite of what’s missing from satisfaction. We give thanks that God’s vision is larger than our own peculiar interests and pursuits, not limited by what we claim as abundance or deficiency, more than our past or hopes for the future. “We are especially reminded on Thanksgiving of how the virtue of gratitude enables us to recognize, even in adverse situations, the love of God in every person, every creature, and throughout nature.” (That sentence came from the 2018 Thanksgiving proclamation signed by President Trump!)*

For me to be able to give thanks, broadly and even in adverse situations, I need to be together with you tonight, to remember with this assembly that it is about community that is more than the familiar bounds of comfort, that has to adapt to welcoming strangers (who, it turns out, aren’t that strange), has to look beyond what I consider good for myself, has to look beyond the politics I’d claim or even notions of a nation, has to hold a big ecological picture that we are all members of God’s household, God’s kingdom, God’s purposes for life.

To give thanks, then, I need to remember this is about God, and God’s persistence for us. I need to see that it’s not only about a plate in front of me, but about a cross in our midst. In that way, I can remember that Jesus wasn’t addressing a crowd gathered around my full Thanksgiving table with all of its well-clad pleasantries, but those who didn’t have food or drink or clothes and for whom life was extremely tenuous and threatened, most especially by the government over them. And still, Jesus could point to the ultimate heart of the matter that they were in his care, and that no lack and no abundance could separate us from the love of God, and God’s insistence on vindicating life. That is what fills us, with gladness and joy.

* <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/presidential-proclamation-thanksgiving-day-2018/>