

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
November 18, 2018
Title: Thanksgiving
Scripture: 1 Timothy 2:1-7
Matthew 6:25-33

This week many people will gather around large tables overflowing with food. Some may take the time to go around the table and ask everyone to name something that are thankful for and the responses will be varied. Many many more will not gather around a table. They may sit at a table by alone or sit in front of the television set with a turkey sandwich or something else. For others it will be one more day of being hungry and wondering where their next meal will come from.

In some places there will be great joy and wonderful conversation. In others there will be tension as family history makes for difficult times, or as comments lead to political disagreements or arguments. For some there will be new people around the table – a baby, a new boyfriend or girlfriend, a guest. For some there will be people missing from around the table following a divorce, a fight, someone moving, or that painful emptiness caused by the death of a much loved and now deceased family member. For some there will be pain realizing that this is likely to be the last time that they gather with certain family members whose health is failing or for whom there will be a drastic life change in the coming year.

I probably wouldn't be too far off base to say, that for the majority of people it won't be the ideal Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving that we often try to measure ours against. However, and this is important, thanksgiving isn't or shouldn't be about having a Norman Rockwell picture perfect

holiday. Thanksgiving is meant to be something else – but something equally as important.

Thanksgiving is a time to stop and take a look at all the blessings that we do have in our lives and to thank others for being part of what makes our lives good and giving thanks to God for all the blessings that we do have. Sometimes when things are going especially hard, it can be difficult to see the things for which we can give thanks.

I read this week that “When Robinson Crusoe was wrecked on his lonely island, he drew up in two columns what he called the evil and the good. He was cast on a desolate island, but he was still alive – not drowned, as his ship’s company was. He was apart from human society, but he was not starving. He had no clothes, but he was in a hot climate where he did not need them. He was without means of defense, but he saw no wild beasts such as he had seen on the coast of Africa. He had no one to whom he could speak, but God had sent the ship so near to the shore that he could get out of it all the things necessary for his basic wants. So he concluded that there was not any condition in the world so miserable but that one could find something for which to be grateful.”ⁱ

I think one could argue fairly convincingly that the situation was far from ideal, but it is true that if we are willing and able to look around, we can generally find something to be thankful for even in the most dire circumstances. Why is this important? It is important because it makes a difference in how we deal with what happens in life. It is important because it will affect many other things.

There is a legend told of “a man who found the barn where Satan kept his seeds ready to be sown in the human heart, and on finding the seeds of discouragement more numerous than others, he learned that

those seeds could be made to grow almost anywhere. When Satan was questioned, he reluctantly admitted that there was one place in which he could never get them to thrive. 'And where is that?' asked the man. Satan replied sadly, 'In the heart of a grateful (person).'ⁱⁱ

Our gospel lesson for this morning is one that reminds us to look to the blessings of life, rather than the places where we might find discouragement. It reminds us that there are many things in our lives that we cannot change and that worrying about them will not change them.

Worrying can take a lot of energy, and it is a favorite activity for some people. Years ago, I read about a Wednesday afternoon worry group. Now, if you wanted to start a group, it could meet anytime, but the rules are what's important. During the week, whenever something comes up that you think you need to worry about, you write it down on a piece of paper but you do not worry about it now. Instead you put the piece of paper in a special box for the worry club.

On Wednesday afternoon, when it is time for the Wednesday afternoon worry club, you open the box and carefully read each item in there. You divide the papers into two piles. One is the pile of things you still need to worry about. The other is the pile of things that you don't need to worry about any longer.

When you have the two piles, you take the pile of things that you no longer need to worry about, crumple them up and throw them in the trash. Then you pick up the pile of things that still need some worrying and carefully put them back in the box until next Wednesday's meeting.ⁱⁱⁱ

Worrying takes a lot of energy that we could use for other things.

The recently deceased Eugene Peterson writing in *The Message*, put it this way. ²⁵⁻²⁶ "If you decide for God, living a life of God-worship, it follows

that you don't fuss about what's on the table at mealtimes or whether the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the birds, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, careless in the care of God. And you count far more to him than birds.

²⁷⁻²⁹ “Has anyone by fussing in front of the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch? All this time and money wasted on fashion—do you think it makes that much difference? Instead of looking at the fashions, walk out into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They never primp or shop, but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them.

³⁰⁻³³ “If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers—most of which are never even seen—don't you think he'll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you? What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with *getting*, so you can respond to God's *giving*. People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out.”

One line in there really jumped out at me. “What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with *getting*, so you can respond to God's *giving*.” Thanksgiving is about “giving thanks” and that is more than simply taking a minute once a year to name the things we are thankful for.

Thanksgiving or giving thanks is really a way of life. Certainly, one of the ways that we give thanks is verbally. We can thank other people, we

can offer prayers of thanksgiving to God, but it goes beyond that. Thanksgiving means putting our thanks into action.

If we have enough food to feed ourselves, then giving thanks may mean giving food to those who do not. If we have a warm house to live in, giving thanks may mean helping to provide a safe warm shelter for those who do not. If we have clothes to wear, then giving thanks may mean helping to clothe those who are in need of clothes.

If no one challenged our right to vote a couple of weeks ago, giving thanks may mean working to be sure that someone else's right to vote is honored. If our homes are places of love and safety, giving thanks may mean being intentional about giving love to those who do not find that love at home. If we are privileged enough to know that someone will listen to us when we speak, then thanks giving may mean being a voice for those who are silenced by others.

There are so many needs around us that it is easy for them to become overwhelming. I cannot even begin to wrap my head around the incredible destruction in California from the fires that are burning out of control. I can't begin to imagine a whole town burned. I am grateful that UMCOR – the United Methodist Committee on Relief is already actively engaged in California in response to the fires. At the same time, they are actively engaged in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, North and South Carolina in response to Hurricanes Michael & Florence. They responded to the gas explosions and fires in the Merrimack Valley. None of us in this room are certified in early response team training so we are not able to physically be there, but we can be there through donations to the UMCOR Disaster Fund.

There are many needs around us and we are not able to respond to them all. There are many skills needed and none of us have them all. But each of us is able to give thanks to God by being the hands and feet of Jesus in a hurting world in some way. It may be by listening to someone who needs a listening ear. It may be by providing transportation for someone who needs a ride. Maybe it's by calling someone who is ill and checking in on them. Maybe it's by caring for a child so an exhausted parent can get a rest. Maybe it's by visiting an elderly person in a nursing home. Maybe it's by joining us in a few weeks to sing Christmas carols and bring smiles to residents of Aldersbridge.

If you were at our church fair yesterday, you saw a wide variety of handmade items for sale. The proceeds from yesterday's fair will help support the ministry and the mission of this congregation and the wider church. What you may or may not have been aware of were that some of the people who made items for the fair are people who love God and love our church but who we don't see here very often. Still in thanks giving for blessings in their lives they have given of their time, talents, resources to contribute to a larger project and greater good.

During the various times of preparation there were people working together, but during that time there was also sharing of some of the things happening in peoples' lives. There was concern being shared for loved ones, for needs greater than us. There were times of celebration. There were times of laughter. There were times of getting to know people in different ways than we do when we gather on Sunday morning.

I want to invite and encourage each of us, during the weeks ahead and especially during this week that includes the holiday we call Thanksgiving to open our eyes to see the love around us, to see the places

where people are sharing hope and love and to see the places where we can be one of the people sharing that hope and love with someone else. Forget about Norman Rockwell and remember Jesus. Forget about having a perfect holiday and being disappointed or discouraged if yours doesn't measure up to some ideal that you hold in your head. Instead, give thanks that you can even be aware that there is a holiday this week. Give thanks that you can reach out and share God's love with even one other person. Give thanks not just in words but in action. May our Thanksgiving be a time of giving and living thanks.

ⁱ Hewett, James S. Editor Illustrations Unlimited Tyndale House, 1988, p.258 #1

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p.262 #12

ⁱⁱⁱ I read this years ago, but do not remember the source.