

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
November 24, 2019
Title: Giving Thanks
Scripture: Deuteronomy 26:1-11
 Philippians 4:4-9
 John 6:25-35

November 24th is a day that is always filled with memories for me. It was on this day 44 years ago that my first child was born, and we came home from the hospital a couple of days later on Thanksgiving. It was also on this day, the day before Thanksgiving that my mother died 9 years ago. Get me talking and I can tell you many stories about Thanksgiving.

That's true for most of us, isn't it? We have stories and if we gather with family or friends, or if we spend Thanksgiving with strangers or alone, we often think about those memories. We may find ourselves reminiscing and telling some of those stories.

In the Bible, people are often reminded to tell the stories of who they are and how they became those people. As we gather for Thanksgiving, we think of all the things for which we are thankful. Most of the images that we use for Thanksgiving include lots of food. You can see it on the cover of today's bulletin. You can see it on the altar this morning. Thanksgiving is a time when food pantries and other organizations are distributing large amounts of food for one meal – sometimes more than people normally eat in several days.

We heard instructions to the Hebrew people just before they ended their 40-year wandering in the wilderness. They were about to enter the promised land – the land they believed that God was giving to them; a land they believed would be flowing with milk and honey. But they are warned

not to get too comfortable – not to forget who they were and what they had been through and how they understood God’s action in their lives.

They were to take the first food from their harvest and bring it to the priest as a thank offering to God. Just as important as bringing the offering was to remember why they were doing this. They would tell their identity story, the corporate story of who they were and how God had been working in their lives. One of the reasons for doing this was so that there would be a time when they were intentional about helping their children know, internalize and celebrate the family story. They were also telling the story as a way to praise God, to remind themselves that they had not done all this by themselves, but with God’s help.

They remembered that their ancestor Abraham was a man who went to Egypt and lived there as an alien – a stranger. Joseph, one of his descendants worked for the Egyptian Pharaoh and saved many from dying during a time of famine. Later Joseph and his descendants became so numerous that the Egyptians were threatened and frightened by their number and sought to control them by enslaving them. God heard their cry and sent Moses to lead them safely out of Egypt.

Once they were safely out of Egypt, the people began to complain about their circumstances and forgot that God had rescued them from slavery. In the reading we just heard, they were being told about what would be expected of them when they were living in the land that they believe God had promised to them. At the time of harvest, they were to take the first food they gathered and bring it to God to say thank you, to remember and retell the story.

Then they were to sit down in Thanksgiving with the Levites - the clan responsible for the religious and educational life of the Hebrew people. The

Levites devoted all of their life to this work and since they did not have land of their own, the other tribes were to provide food for them.

They were also to invite the aliens who lived among them; people who had an identity story that was different than theirs. They had once been aliens living among the Egyptians and had been treated harshly; but they were to behave differently and include the aliens among them in their celebrations. They were to continue the tradition of taking care of anyone in need and they were to provide hospitality to the stranger. Throughout scripture they – and we – are reminded that we have been strangers in many ways, and we are to also welcome the stranger.

When we tell our stories, do we include God in those stories? Do we remember and celebrate what God has done, or is it all about us?

The story is told of a “newly appointed pastor who went to visit the home of a congregation member. Upon arriving there, the minister discovered his host was an avid gardener, and was only too delighted to show his pastor around the garden, a magnificent sea of greens, purples, blues, whites, yellows and pinks. Wanting to set the relationship off on a strong, positive note, the pastor said, ‘Praise God for the beauty of his handiwork.’

“But his host replied in a somewhat offended tone, ‘Now pastor, don’t go giving all the credit to god. You have seen this garden when the Almighty had it all to himself!’”ⁱ Clearly, he wanted and thought he deserved some or most of the credit for his garden.

As someone who is a disaster when it comes to gardening, I am more than ready to give him and others credit for the beauty of a garden and the bounty of the harvest. At the same time, it is important to remember that it is God who provides the sun and the rain that allows the planting to be

successful. It is God who created us with brains and the ability to learn and make decision. It is God who created each of us with passions and desires that lead us in different paths.

I believe that it is part of God's design and plan that we are to be co-creators with God. God provides us with the "raw materials" if you will, the essential components – sun, rain, brain, abilities, passions, desires, hopes, dreams, but it is also up to us to make use of all of these and to partner with God to bring about God's desire. In so many areas of our lives and in our world, we can choose to partner with God to do amazing things or we can choose to ignore the interconnectedness of creation and humanity and find ourselves running down paths that may lead only to more problems and possible destruction.

Thanksgiving is the time when we spend some extra time telling our stories and paying extra attention to the things for which we give thanks. I give thanks for farmers and agriculturists and environmentalists who plan the best ways to grow the crops that feed us. I give thanks for those who are paying attention to climate change and trying to raise our awareness so that we can be partners with God in caring for our earth, rather than destroying it.

I give thanks for the people who responded to an opportunity and challenge over 50 years ago to bring some churches together to give birth to a new congregation here. I give thanks that God was inspiring, and guiding people in that process.

What are the things for which you give thanks this year? Where is God working in your life and in the lives of those around you? What story will you tell this year? These are not rhetorical questions. I would like us to take a couple of minutes to share our response to those questions. Who

would like to begin? What are you thankful for this year? Where do you see God working?

Take time for people to share.

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 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 thanksgiving may mean being a voice for those who are silenced by others.

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. You may or may not have been aware 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.

<https://storiesforpreaching.com/you-shouldve-seen-this-garden-when-god-had-it/>