

Thanksgiving is Impossible...Almost

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Ephesians 5:15-20

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Not long ago a comedy segment called “Everything’s Amazing and Nobody’s Happy” was circulating on YouTube. The comedian, Louis C.K., tells how he was traveling on one of the first commercial flights offering wi-fi access on the internet. When after a few minutes the service crashed, the passenger in the seat next to him cursed in disgust. Amazing, thought Louis. “How quickly the world owes him something that he didn’t know existed ten seconds ago.”

Airplanes seem to highlight our human tendency to ingratitude. (Imagine what Lewis and Clark, or those brave pioneers who risked their lives on Conestoga wagons coming westward across the prairie would have thought had you told them we can fly, up in the sky in what we call an airplane, from St Louis to San Francisco in three hours.) And we complain “What a horrible flight! We sat on the runway for an hour before takeoff! And can you believe it—my seat wouldn’t go back all the way!”

How quickly we start to believe the world owes us what didn’t even used to exist. How natural it is for us to whine and complain while we take things more and more things for granted.

And how fitting it seems, then, for us this morning to recount some of the history of those Pilgrims, our direct ancestors in the faith, who risked everything in order to spread the Light of the Gospel and to worship God whole-heartedly in New England. (Their self-understanding is reflected clearly in the name of the town “New Canaan,” CT, settled just before 1700. The original Pilgrims, the Israelites, had fled oppression in Egypt and passed through the waters of the Jordan River in order to settle the original Canaan in obedience to God—just as the Mayflower Pilgrims crossed the waters of the Atlantic, fleeing religious oppression, in order to settle in the “New Canaan” in obedience to God.) We will be noting how they kept offering thanksgiving to God when circumstances would normally have made this impossible.

I Thanksgiving is important.

Both the world and the Scriptures tell us we should be thankful. Not much room for dispute. There have been countless studies by psychologists as to how people can become happier, but until recently studies had not

confirmed what self-help prophets and others have been saying. Studies have shown happy people live 7-9 years longer than chronically unhappy people, enjoy more loving marriages, even enjoy more productive careers. One study showed that happy college graduates were earning \$25,000/year more, 16 years after graduation, than those who graduates who had said they were generally “unhappy” upon graduation. (from an interview with Robert A Emmons, Ph.D., UCSD, in “Bottom Line Secrets,” Nov 9, 2009)

Only now is research beginning to show that choosing to be grateful, getting in the habit of being grateful, will make us more happy. (Many people believe just the opposite: being happy, having nice stuff, good fortune, creates gratitude.) So now you can bet psychologists and therapists will be trying to train everyone to be grateful. And there are a lot worse things you could do.

This current research is only catching up to what most of you have long known: Thanksgiving has always been and will always be essential in the lives of the children of God. References to giving thanks to God or singing songs of praise number some 178 times in the Psalms alone—written and collected a thousand years before Jesus.

That most powerful of His disciples, the apostle Paul, both practiced and preached the central importance of thanksgiving. We just heard, in our lesson, his urging to “Give thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...” [v 20] (Elsewhere he reminded the Thessalonians, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances...” [5:16-17])

At one point, to the Colossians, Paul sums up the entire essence of our life in Christ and the most basic function of our church as expressing our gratitude: “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, [that is, as we have chosen to come into life-changing relationship with God through Jesus], continue to live your lives in Him—rooted and built up in Him...[and exactly how do we do that?] just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.” Abound in thanksgiving.

This essential Christian call to continue to give thanks to God is no surprise to most of you. But which of us, child or adult, hasn’t balked: “What do you mean, I have to pray again! I did it last night. It’s not my turn. Make him pray instead.” “What do you mean, I have to give thanks?

My needs are not being met!” “What do you mean I have to worship every Sunday! I thought we lived by grace, not by Law!” “What do you mean I have to tidy up all the books and papers in my office?”...(bad example—never mind.) We all recognize thanksgiving is important.

II Thanksgiving is important. But it's impossible. At least to do it right.

Oh, it's possible to say the words, do the exercises—but it's impossible consistently to live in thanksgiving as God our Provider deserves. Most everybody knows something of the power of positive thinking. “Every cloud has a silver lining.” “The glass is half full.” “Count your blessings.” These are important things to remember, to do.

It's important to count our blessings. What would your list of Thanksgiving blessings look like? Some of the things I'm thankful for:

--The vista out to Catalina, driving down Marguerite, on a glorious clear morning

--The feeling when the car is finally packed and we leave on a family road trip, hands all in, praying to God for safe travels on our vacation to a favorite place: Tahoe, or Sedona, or the Rockies, or the next new adventure

--coming home to Trish each night

--dark chocolate (OK, OK—any kind of chocolate)

--the good honest sweat and the feeling that comes after yoga or hoops or running or tennis—just about any kind of honest sweat

--the flowers that almost always look so cheerful in our church garden

--nice movies (on the big screen, or a DVD at home with Trish or friends. (By the way, I sure liked “Secretariat”)

--the opening kickoff, or tipoff, of a game with your favorite team playing in a big game, either on the widescreen or there in the stadium

--the ways Katie and Matt have been growing up from childhood

--a fondly anticipated book or magazine, and a comfy chair

--the trajectory of a well-struck tee shot on a par three, when it lands in the center of the green and you have to plump up the tiny crater

--a word of encouragement from a friend at just the right time when it helps a lot—especially when the friend has no idea, but you know it's from God

--my 2001 Ford Taurus, which still starts every time and

still avoids expensive surprises

--those occasions, however frequent or rare, when you know God is hearing your prayer, and guiding you in return

--Community Church, and so many of you: the way you stay faithful in your disciplines, and offer yourselves to God and each other in so many varieties of service

It's very possible to do these exercises of thanksgiving, and it's nice, it's just that they're not enough. It's nice to focus on the glass being half full, but it's not enough. Paul has a lot bigger picture in mind than repeating self-help talk about being positive.

(For one thing, these exercises rely on our own ability to be consistent. Like a lot of things, they work fine when you can manage them, but not at all when you can't—and sometimes when you need help the most, you are least able to manage to stay positive. Have you ever had a day when you know you should feel “up,” but you're just “down” instead—today you just don't care? You know you shouldn't take that drink, but today you just don't care? You know you need to have the tough conversation with your partner, your spouse, your child—but today you just don't care?)

Not only this, but maybe you've had a spell where that one day turns into a few days, a week, maybe longer. You'd like to be positive, take on the world—but you just don't have the energy this time. You can't make yourself care that much. You want to be thankful, and maybe you avoid appearing negative—but you know the bottom is dropping out and those dark clouds are clinging closer and dimming darker.

These exercises of thanksgiving are helpful—but they are not enough. And surely this is not what Paul's getting at in what we just heard: “Give thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” [v 20]

Really? Give thanks at all times and for everything? When you're depressed, or tired, or scared, or being mistreated? Give thanks for the very people who are driving you crazy? For the job you're stuck in which you hate? The ailment that pains you, the financial situation that terrifies you? For cancer? Give thanks for cancer? Is Paul nuts? Is he speaking literally, or is this some pious exaggeration? A bad translation from the Greek? I'm afraid he means what he says—which underscores how it's just about impossible to give thanks, to live in thanksgiving, as Paul is commanding us to do.

III Thanksgiving is important, but it's impossible to live in thanksgiving commensurate with the gifts we have received from God. It's impossible...almost. Almost.

Paul clarifies for us exactly how he means that the impossible is, for those who will trust in God, possible. We give thanks always and for everything to God the Father "in the name of our Lord Jesus." Jesus is not a lucky talisman we tack onto the end of our prayers. When we pray in Jesus' name we are reminded that although it is impossible for us to live in full gratitude to the God who has given us every good gift, this is exactly what Jesus did. My ability wavers—but Jesus shows me how. My ability to be consistently thankful and therefore generous and courageous, to live a life of gratitude to the glory of God—this is impossible for me. Jesus reminds me of the limits of my own efforts—and the hubris of my thinking that I can pull it off very well.

The ability to live in life-changing thanksgiving turns out to be a gift. Like every other gift, God will not force me to take it. Especially when I'm pretty sure I don't need it, thank you very much. When I admit my powerlessness, my emptiness, then I can begin to receive the divine gift of deep thanksgiving. Only then can God begin to make a difference to me.

Awareness of "Our Lord Jesus" in the midst of my prayers of thanksgiving "at all times and for everything" reminds me it is in our Savior Jesus, risen from the dead, that my prayers have a sure ground of hope. Give thanks for the job I can't stand? There are a lot of things worse, and, if I back off and submit to His Holy Spirit, there are probably a number of ways I could adjust my attitude and view my work differently. (After all, these days there are probably many people who would willingly take any job any of us does, if it pays. Why was I complaining?)

Loss of job, loss of loved ones, loss of home, loss of economic security—Paul himself had endured most of these. He knew what he was saying—and he kept giving thanks, in our Lord Jesus Christ. ("To live is Christ; to die is gain.") He had encountered his hope and his salvation—our risen Lord, Jesus. Jesus who freely gave up everything in obedience and thanksgiving to God the Father. In Him, and in prayer, His thanksgiving becomes possible. What we cannot do, what is impossible to us, God will do for us and in us.

It's fitting this Sunday for us in the Congregational tradition to reflect on how those religious Separatists lived this out impossible life of thanksgiving to God. Loss, death, every kind of severe hardship were all hammered out in the lives of these Pilgrims.

You might remember that the company of covenanted

Separatists who landed at Plymouth included 102 persons total, in addition to the Mayflower's crew and some in their midst who were not religious. (Baby Oceanus Hopkins was born at sea, and baby Peregrine White at anchor off Cape Cod.) Many had sold their homes and estates 12 years before, when they had fled England for religious freedom in Leyden, Holland. Endless North Atlantic winter storms kept them all belowdecks in seasickening squalor for weeks at a time. (They passed much of the time passing those 66 days in singing Psalms down there—so often that at least one of the seasoned crew took to making fun of their distress, calling them "Puke-stocking psalm-singers".) [The storms deposited them far off course—they had been intending to land at the mouth of the Hudson, in land granted to and governed by the charter of the Virginia Company. Ashore on Cape Cod, however, they would be living under the jurisdiction of no government entity. The Mayflower compact ensued, modeled after the covenant the pilgrims had entered into when they left their village in 1606. This charter marked the first time in recorded history free and equal persons had voluntarily created their own new civil government.]

This company of Pilgrims prayed in fervent thanksgiving when they reached land. William Bradford recorded the moment: "Being thus arrived in a good harbor and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees and blessed the God of heaven, who had brought them over the vast and furious ocean, and delivered them from all the perils and miseries thereof..." [These citations come from *The Light and the Glory*, Peter Marshall and David Manuel, Fleming-Revell Publishers]

Their winter stores of food had been extorted from them by James Weston who, knowing they could not go back, changed the terms of what they owed the day they left England. They were greatly weakened not only from malnourishment but also from the long crossing; they began to succumb to scurvy, pneumonia, weakness, the cold of the brutal New England winter. The "General Sickness," they called it. You might remember the fearful statistics: six of the Pilgrims died in December; in February seventeen more died. They buried the dead at night so the hostile neighboring Native Americans would not know how depleted they were becoming. (Of their entire company, at one point only five were well enough to tend all the sick.) Thirteen more died in March. 1621. Thirteen of the eighteen wives died; only three families made it through the winter intact. Sunday morning Worship remained their highlight; their spirits were strengthened as they continued to worship and give thanksgiving to God. As the drums would sound, even some of the crew still waiting aboard the Mayflower

would row in to join in worship.

Things were thawing a bit by March. You can imagine their amazement when a Native-American came walking up their central main street and into the common house. “Welcome,” he boomed out in English. The next thing he said was “Have you got any beer?” (It’s a long story how God brought that English-speaking Algonquin chief named Samoset to them, but he had learned English from fishing captains who had harbored in Maine. Remember John Cabot had landed in that region for England back in 1497 and there had been fishing activity in the area for a century.)

Samoset brought back Squanto the following week. Squanto had lived nine years in England; upon returning to his own land he found that every man, woman and child of his own tribe had died. He was despondent—until Samoset told him of this tiny band of peaceful English settlers who had struggled so desperately merely to stay alive. Squanto found new reason to live—he adopted these helpless Pilgrims and taught them how to survive: how to catch eel and other fish, how to plant corn and pumpkins and other staples and how to make maple syrup and how to find berries and medicinal herbs. He was, literally, a Godsend.

On April 2, 1621 Captain Jones of the Mayflower returned for England. He had been won over by the endurance and the kind spirit of the Pilgrims, and he feared for their lives. He kindly invited any and all to return safely with his crew. Although death stalked so near to every family, their covenant bonds to God and each other were so strong that not a single one of the Pilgrims elected to return.

It was October of 1621 that first harvest came in so abundantly, and the Pilgrims—now reduced to 51, exactly half of their original 102—invited the neighboring Wampanoags to join them in a feast of thanksgiving to God. The prayer of thanksgiving offered by elder William Brewster kicked off what turned into three days of merry-making and athletic contests and baking and cooking and feasting. That part hasn’t much changed!

They did not all live happily ever after; the challenges continued. One month later the sailing ship “Fortune” dropped off another 35 colonists. They brought no food, no bedding, no supplies. Common rations, already dangerously low, dropped to five kernels of corn per day per person. More boats kept bringing more settlers (not necessarily Pilgrims) until the situation was again dire by the growing season of 1623. The Pilgrims had planted double the crop corn of the previous year, but a prolonged drought of twelve weeks was threatening to destroy all of

it. They stopped work and gathered together all day in the common house, the place of worship for nine hours of total fasting and intense prayer to God. That very night the soft rains came, persisting for two wonderful weeks. The years’ crop was saved. Pilgrim father Edward Winslow wrote how, two weeks later, “Another solemn day was set apart...wherein we returned glory, honor, and praise, with all thankfulness to our God who dwelt so graciously with us.” That harvest was bountiful, allowing the Pilgrims to trade excess corn with neighboring Indians for needed provisions—and they happily called for a second Thanksgiving festival.

That kind of Thanksgiving, and the resulting blessing, is impossible apart from God. In Christ all things are possible.

Happy Thanksgiving.

Ephesians 5:15-20

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.