

First Presbyterian Church
Thanksgiving Day
November 24, 2005
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First Reading: Genesis 1:26-31
Second Reading: I John 3:1-3
Gospel: Luke 12:16-21

Grateful for Who We Are

Not all thanksgiving prayers are worthy – or even appropriate. Take, for example, the account Jesus gives of the Pharisee who went to the temple to pray. His prayer goes like this:

“God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.”

Although the words “God” and “thank you” are at the front end of this prayer, it ends up being little more than a sincere expression of self-congratulation. “Thank you, Lord, that I’m better than other people.” The Pharisee is guilty of saying out loud what some may think, but are careful not to speak.

Likewise, giving thanks for all our STUFF can tend to drift in that same direction. Now to be sure, counting our blessings can be a very helpful spiritual exercise. It’s useful in developing a spirit of humility and gratitude to God, the Giver of every blessing. Yet counting our blessings can also warp into a kind of grand inventory of personal success and achievement – an inventory that yields neither humility nor gratitude, but arrogance and an inflated ego. (“Oh, what a good boy am I.”)

So goes the tale of the Rich Farmer which Jesus relates in today’s gospel reading. The man has a dilemma. His harvest has been so abundant that he doesn’t have enough storage space to accommodate the bumper crop. So, he decides to tear down the old barns and build new and larger ones to store all his stuff. At that point, the farmer’s prayer (if you can call it that) goes like this: “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years: relax, eat, drink, be merry.” His focus is entirely on his STUFF, and the comfort and security it provides. What the farmer fails to realize is that his stuff is going to last a lot longer than he is.

Now stuff is not all bad! I like my stuff – I enjoy my stuff. (Believe me, I was grateful for a heated car seat on my way over here today!) Jesus says the Father knows we need stuff. There’s nothing inherently wrong with having and enjoying stuff – certainly it’s right and good to be thankful for stuff. It’s even good to “relax, eat, drink and be merry.” You will recall that Jesus was hardly an ascetic hermit – he was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard. He was by no means opposed to enjoying a good time: remember the wedding at Cana!

Yet Jesus does introduce this parable of the wealthy farmer with a warning: “One’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Jesus goes on to say in this same chapter: “Life is more than food, the body more than clothing.” What is the “more” that Jesus points to? Beyond all our great stuff, for what can we be truly thankful?

How about ourselves? It is always good to thank God for making us who we are.

- Not like the Pharisee: “I thank you that I am not like other people.”
- But just the opposite: “Thank you, God, that I am like other people.” “Thank you, Lord, for my life as one of your creatures, for my life as a human being.”

It’s true, as Psalm 139 reminds us, that we humans are “fearfully and wonderfully made.” More marvelous than any stuff we could ever dream of possessing is our wondrous human

capacity to experience, appreciate and enjoy most anything and everything – things both great and small. The human body is magnificent! We have senses to apprehend and engage all the wonders of creation around us:

The breath of cold, fresh air filling our lungs
Fingers to pick a fresh, ripe raspberry
Ears to absorb the beautiful music we're hearing this morning
Feet to stroll along the hard-packed beach where sand and waves meet in endless cycle.
Eyes to see the stark outline of bare oak trees against a blazing winter sunset
Arms to embrace the ones we love

Whether it's survivors of the tsunami, or hurricane, or earthquake, so often the story is the same: People who have lost absolutely all their stuff, every possession, give thanks for what is so much more precious: to be alive!

Thank God for your heart, which beats moment to moment, day to day, without any effort on your part. The human heart does some heavy lifting! I learned a while back that each day, the work done by a pumping heart is equivalent to lifting two tons to the fifth floor of a building! Imagine that! Why do we only start to pay attention when these marvelous organs stop working optimally?

We do share much in common with God's other creatures. In purely physical terms they can be every more impressive than we are:

The vision of a hawk
The speed of a cheetah
The majesty of a breaching whale

Yet we are also unique. God created human beings as the last act of creation – and God saved the best for last. Psalm 8 declares we are made but a little lower than the angels – the crown of the whole creation. Surely we can give thanks that we have been created in the very image of God. Now this doesn't mean God looks like us. It means we enjoy God-like capacities:

- As God creates, so do we.
- As God imagines and envisions things that are not, so can we.
- As God both speaks and listens, so do we.
- As God is not a God of confusion but a God who reasons, so are we able to make sense.
- As God is passionate in his mercy and his justice, so we are capable of both.
- As God is tender hearted, so can we be.
- As God is free, so are we free to choose to do and to be.
- As God is mysterious, so is the nature of human beings.

Iraeus declared in the second century: "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." It's just as true today – yet so often we forget or allow ourselves to be distracted. We look to the lives of celebrities as somehow more interesting, more valuable, more worthy than our own. We mistake an extensive resumé as a measure of human worth. We are impressed with the trappings of wealth and accomplishment.

Now, I can't say I always go along with everything Jesse Jackson says or does – but there's something very right about a ministry that seeks to instill a sense of profound worth in those who have little or none. When Jesse can get a gym full of school children to chant with conviction and enthusiasm, "I am somebody!" a fundamental truth is being taught and learned.

Today – like every day – is a good day to be thankful.

Thankful for what? For life itself! To be living and breathing on this good earth.

Thankful to whom? To God (I've often wondered: on Thanksgiving, to whom are non-believers thankful? The grocery store? The Butterball Hotline?)

Gratitude and reverence are vital to the life of the human spirit – and they are sorely lacking in our culture today. Without gratitude and reverence, life becomes a grim, self-seeking enterprise.

We Christians have a story to tell that documents our reasons to be both grateful and reverent. (We just don't do a great job of getting the story out.)

We are grateful for who we are: we are not here by accident, we are created by God in the image of God. Not one of us is self-made.

Not only are we God's creatures, formed of the same stuff the stars are made of, we are also God's children. Even when we failed to manifest the godly image in which we were made, God redeemed us and adopted us as sons and daughters through Jesus Christ.

Think of it: neither our creation nor our salvation, neither our birth nor our baptism required any input from any of us. These lives we call our own are utterly and completely a gift.

GRATITUDE only makes sense in response to a gift (we're not grateful for something we've earned.) And if there is a GIFT, there must also be a GIVER.

Thanks be to God, from whom all blessing flow!

AMEN.