

## “The Road to Thanksgiving”

I Thessalonians 5.15-18

November 24, 2013  
Rev. D2

Today is what we call in the Church, Thanksgiving Sunday.  
It's always the Sunday before Thanksgiving Day!  
I am reminded of the image of the cornucopia or horn of plenty.  
It's a symbol of abundance and nourishment, commonly a large horn-shaped basket filled with various kinds of festive fruits and vegetables.  
Cornucopia has come to be associated with the First Thanksgiving and with the harvest.  
You will recall that in 1621 there was a feast on the Plymouth plantation.  
The feast was big enough for 53 pilgrims and 90 Native Americans.  
It was a feast of corn, fish, turkey, ducks, berries and pumpkin and everything that the harvest provided.  
And the feast lasted for 3 days.  
Sometime between day 2 and 3 is when the Pilgrim men left the table and went home and changed into their sweatpants so they could come back for dessert.  
Or at least, that's how the legend has been foretold in the David household.

That first Thanksgiving was a celebration of the plenty.  
Down through the years there have been various days of Thanksgiving.  
But, it wasn't until a woman by the name of Sarah Hale wanted a national Day of Thanksgiving, that it actually became a national holiday.  
She's the author of the “Mary Had A Little Lamb” poem.  
In the middle of the American Civil War, she wrote a series of editorials that prompted President Abraham Lincoln to proclaim a national Thanksgiving Day to be celebrated on the final Thursday in November of 1863.  
The document, written by Secretary of State William Seward, reads in part as follows:

The year that is drawing towards its close, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies.  
To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come..., they are from the providence of Almighty God.

Abraham Lincoln didn't just think that Thanksgiving was an event or an activity that we do during sunny days;  
But Thanksgiving was a relevant expression that was appropriate for times when the future was uncertain and the present was difficult as well.  
Thanksgiving is a tradition in other faiths too.

The Jewish faith has a thanksgiving celebration known as: Sukkoth.

Sukkoth is one of the 3 main celebrations where the Jewish people would come from all over the Holy Land singing as they came into the City of Jerusalem.  
Sukkoth was a celebration of the harvest each fall;

But, it was also a celebration of the 40 years that the Jewish people got up every morning in the wilderness and ate the manna that was just enough for each day that God provided. The Christian faith has its own thanksgiving meal and we call it Holy Communion. Holy Communion is the celebration of the Body and Blood of Christ that has been given for us.

And in that meal we receive God's communication of love and salvation.  
The other word we have for Holy Communion reflects our response.  
It's the word – Eucharist.

In the Greek, it's the word Eucharistos which means "Give Thanks!"

So, every time we celebrate Holy Communion or the Eucharist, God is saying to us:  
I love you!

And we receive that message and we give thanks in response!

All of this is to say, that being thankful is not just about manners and being a good person or being polite.

Being thankful has something to do with the condition of our souls.

It has something to do with our relationship with God and the world around us.

Being thankful is not as easy as we might think.

We move around so fast in our daily lives that it's hard to slow down enough to even know what we're doing.

Neuro-Scientists say that the reason we're not more thankful is because we're not more thankful.

We have these Neuro-pathways they tell us –

You've heard of the phrase: "A Train of Thought" right?

That metaphor explains this new finding about neuro pathways.

Our brain has a pathway from one thought to the next thought.

And some of these pathways are well worn.

Take for instance those of you who have a dog.

When you let your dog out into the back yard, they may run all over the back yard, but there are certain pathways that your dog runs more often.

Maybe it's along the fence or perhaps it's between their doghouse and their food bowl.

This is how our brains work too.

Whenever something comes up, our second thought that follows it is going to be the easiest thought.

It's going to be the thought of least resistance.

It's the default thought.

Sometimes the easiest thought is a negative thought;

Or a critical thought;

Or it may even be a self-critical thought.

People who struggle with negative thinking;

Or self-esteem;

Or depression;

Or anxiety;

Or people dealing with addiction may have a train of thought that is so well worn that whenever something happens, they're quick to go down this path because it's the path that has been used the most.

So, therefore, Thanksgiving is not just an act of politeness.

It's an act of remembering that a new path exists.

That in this moment I can forge a new path ahead.

So, if Thanksgiving is going to be a value for us, then in order for us to be thankful, we must first be more thankful.

Hopefully, it'll be possible that one day if we apply this habit to our lives, then it will be hard for us to not be thankful.

I think it's possible that being thankful can become the most natural thing that happens.

There's another reason why we struggle with thanksgiving.

It's a frame of mind issue.

For instance, one of my colleagues was making hospital visits the other day like we all do.

He passed the nurses' station where a nurse was completing some paperwork.

Then, another nurse came into the station and noticed that the nurse doing the paperwork had a new ring upon her right hand and made a positive comment about it.

It was the nurse's response that caught the attention of my colleague when she said:

"Oh, my husband gave it to me.

I earned every bit of it."

What was behind her words?

Was it a feeling of being valued and appreciated?

Or was it a feeling of entitlement?

What would happen if the woman had received the ring and thought that it wasn't because she earned it, but because it was an unearned gift.

We might call this grace or a blessing for something we didn't even deserve.

There's something about being thankful that has to have at its very core – this idea of receiving things that we don't deserve.

It can be a ring;

A hug;

A friendship;

Whatever gift it is – you can see the difference between these two pathways.

To be a thankful person means being a person who realizes that the things we receive on a daily basis are not the enviable consequences of our own good works, but are instead the kindness of another person who gives us a gift that we have not earned.

To be thankful means to be a recipient – to receive.

Last month when Debbie and I were out in California, we saw beautiful flowers everywhere.

And I got to thinking that it wasn't me who was seeing the beautiful flowers, it was that they gave me their beauty.

It wasn't that I smelled the flowers.

It was that they gave me their scent.

Just the change of the sentence changes everything for me.  
 It changes my whole perspective; my whole frame of mind.  
 On the plane ride home I waved at a small child.  
 But, I realize that I didn't really wave at the child.  
 The child gave me his smile.  
 I must admit that my heart isn't always thinking this way.  
 My frame of mind isn't always alert to seeing the world in this way.  
 But, when it is, I notice.  
 And when it is, the people around me notice as well.  
 This morning when I was leaving the house I gave Debbie a kiss before I walked out the door.  
 But, when my heart is in the right place, it's far more meaningful.  
 I realized this morning that I didn't give my wife a kiss.  
 My wife gave me a kiss before I walked out the door this morning.  
 Not you, but me.  
 And nothing I did deserved it.  
 I didn't earn it.  
 I can't make my wife love me.  
 I can't make anybody love me.  
 I can't use my words or actions to twist their will in order to get them to do what I want them to do or need them to do.  
 We can't make somebody love us.  
 So, when Debbie showed me that expression of love this morning, it was a gift.  
 It was grace.  
 And I received it.

When my daughter was a baby she gave me some very toxic diapers.  
 They smelled so bad that they burned my nostrils.  
 My first thought was that I didn't deserve this.  
 And yet, she gave, and gave, and gave.  
 She was a generous giver.  
 Yet, she trusted me to be the person to take care of her and makes things right.  
 You see, when I walk around as a person who is aware of unearned blessings coming at me, my whole frame of mind is different.  
 Think about your day so far and what has happened.  
 Take out a pen and write down on your bulletin a sentence where you're the subject and there's an object that follows, like:  
 I went to Church.  
 I ate breakfast.  
 I called my Mom.  
 Now, take that same sentence and flip it around.  
 Instead of saying: I went to Church today;  
 What would happen if we said:  
 The Church gathered around me to sing songs with me and to support me.  
 Or instead of I ate breakfast;

We might say that the farmers and grocer's and truck drivers all united in order to allow me to have food that I could not kill or grow by myself.

What if instead of saying: I called my Mom today;

We said:

My Mom gave me her time.

It's the same event.

It's just the idea that we recognize that there's a blessing that happens.

This is not just something we apply to other persons in our lives, but something we apply to God as well.

We are receiving unearned blessings all the time.

The fact that you and I are alive is not something that we have earned.

It is an event of grace.

It's a blessing undeserved.

I've heard the story that says:

If you were the only person in the world, God would have still sent his son to die on the Cross for the forgiveness of your sins and to have a relationship with you.

In the same way, I believe that God made the sun to rise in the morning to warm you and to set in the evening to tuck you in to sleep.

This is not being self-centered.

It's realizing that there's more going on than just you acting.

And we get to receive this too.

We're all created by God to be loved by God!

When we realize that we're loved;

When we realize the achievement of God's desired outcome, then that is success.

That's us succeeding in the purpose of life to have known that there is a God who loves us.

When we're aware of our blessings, then we are being successful in our position as humans.

This is not just a set of feelings and thoughts that benefit our way of everyday life, but it's also a set of behaviors and thoughts that prepare us for times that may be more difficult.

The Apostle Paul said in our text for today:

Give thanks in all circumstances.

He didn't say:

Give thanks for all circumstances.

So, no matter what our situation, Paul says we are to give praise to God.

Or another way of saying it is to say:

"Alleluia, Praise be to God."

In all circumstances we say Alleluia anyway!

It's a good mantra that many of our ancestors have had on their lips.

King David experienced hardships;

He had guilt for his sin;

One of his sons died when he was only 7 days old and another son who later tried to kill him.

He had every reason to pack up his faith and toss it out the window, but he wrote these words:

Why am I so discouraged?

Why is my heart so sad?

I will put my hope in God! (Ps42; 43, 62; 65; 69; 71; 119; IISam.22)

I will praise him again, my savior and my God.

It was David saying in essence:

Alleluia anyway!

That is something for all of us to remember and to hold onto.

Let's say it together... Alleluia anyway!

That's a mantra we can put into our back pocket and pull out and use anytime.

So, when we're sitting around our Thanksgiving Dinner Table and let's say hypothetically:

There's a dysfunctional awkwardness that's not being addressed;

Our mantra can be - Alleluia anyway!

When stress is piling up and coming at us from all directions;

Our mantra can be - Alleluia anyway!

When you are a Chargers fan;

My mantra can be - Alleluia anyway!

And if someday in the future, there's a diagnosis that comes that you would rather not have;

In that moment, your mantra can be - Alleluia anyway!

Alleluia anyway is a stubborn statement of faith.

It recognizes that the present is not always a pleasant place to be.

But, it also recognizes that stubbornly that we have received so much thanksgiving, so much to be thankful for With salvation;

With friendships;

With loves;

With hugs;

That even in those days we have reasons to say:

Alleluia anyway!

I believe our biggest challenge is to stay faithful and thankful.

Recently, I was visiting our shut-ins and one of them confided in me that they were struggling with why they were still around.

My response was – you are worthy!

My faith teaches me that God is everywhere in these times.

I said look at all those photos on your wall; they are who you live for.

You still have a purpose, a mark of influence to place upon their lives.

It is God who sends our lay ministers to visit with you.

It is God who makes it possible for a person that comes each week to take you for a drive out through Goll Woods.

I know that we want God to explain the whys, but what I have discovered is that there is no answer to that.

But, what I have learned –

Is that God will never abandon us.

I don't think we can endure without our faith and without the "Stretcher-bearers" that come into our lives and carry us.

Thankfulness and faith, though challenging in the hard times, are the life preservers to help us keep swimming in troubled waters.

My message to you today is –

I receive, I receive, I receive!

God has given us so many blessings.

And we need to create rhythms and rituals to respond to those blessings.

For instance, this Thanksgiving you may be a part of a meal where people will be sitting around a table where you might initiate saying a couple of things that have happened to your family that you are thankful for.

Things that have been unearned blessings over the past year.

But, what if Thanksgiving is not just an event this year?

But, serves as an opportunity to create a tradition in your household of saying things that you're thankful for – before every meal.

I don't know about you, but when we get together with the whole extended family at Thanksgiving there is all sorts of noise and commotion.

There's winning and crying and that's just my wife and I.

The whole room can be filled with chaos as we try to sit down in our assigned seats to pray.

But, I am positive that if you stop to say 2 things you're thankful for, the whole room will change.

The whole set of conversations that you're having will be rerouted into a more thankful place.

Try it this year!

Another tradition between now and Christmas might be to call people who are really important to you and tell them why you are thankful for them.

Or maybe you'll start a Gratitude journal and begin writing down the things you're thankful for.

When I look over what happened during the course of the year, I am always amazed and surprised by what I had forgotten about.

It is so tempting to take so much for granted and only focus on all the negative things that seem to occupy our minds.

What can you do this year –

To "Grow your Thanksgiving;"

To blaze a new neuro-path, a new way of thinking?

How can you do this with other people and with God as well?

Maybe it's singing songs not just on Sundays, but also throughout the week.

Maybe it's how we treat our money and realizing that our money is ultimately a gift from God and we're only responding to God in thanksgiving as we give.

Whether it's to our church or some other needy cause.

Thanksgiving can be a natural progression.

There are two roads that diverged in a wood.

I took the neuro-path less traveled and that has made all the difference!

Perhaps there is a new pathway for you?

The cornucopia is a symbol of abundance.

It's blessings over-flow it's container.

Is your heart shaped like a cornucopia?

That is our challenge – to see everything in life as a gift!

And then to respond with thanks!

Let's pray:

And as we do, I invite you to have your hands open.

And visualize God placing blessings right into your hands.

Blessings upon blessings that are unearned.

Let us take a moment now and say the most natural message to God based upon what you know that you have received....

O God, for all the gifts you have given to us, for every piece of grace we have received, we give you thanks!

For in your holy name we give you thanks and pray as Jesus taught us by saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread.**

**And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.**

**And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.**