



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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CHRIST THE KING SUNDAY

Pennies from Heaven
John 18:33-37; James 1:16-18

My mother has been cooking for a month getting ready for Thanksgiving. Even though the number of people around the table this year will be small with grandchildren scattered hither and yon, there will still be a feast of all our favorite foods. And the food will be abundant! As we all learned when we were children, Thanksgiving is a time to take stock of the abundance of blessings that are ours. It is a time to be mindful of the bounty with which God has blessed us and to be grateful. Or is it? We trace our tradition of Thanksgiving to those English separatists we call Pilgrims and the Native American Wampanoag tribe we know simply as “the Indians.” There is much we can learn about thanksgiving from these old friends.

The first feast in 1621 was a common English harvest festival made possible because the Wampanoag Indians had taught the settlers how to raise corn and fertilize it with fish. As they prepared for the coming winter, the English added to their stores of fruits, vegetables, and fish various fowl including turkey. They celebrated the harvest for a week and, when their native friends joined them for three days of feasting, being far superior hunters, they took to the forest and returned with venison and other game and added it to the food the Pilgrims had gathered. It was a feast of harvest. Two years later, a feast of thanksgiving was held to celebrate, not bounty, but the end of a two-month drought.¹ The gratitude felt by the Pilgrims and the Indians was more about perseverance in scarcity than abundance in times of plenty. They were thankful that the little they did have sustained them and that the rains would replenish their stores and see them through the winter ahead. Having limited resources, they were thankful for everything they did have.

Mind you, I am being neither sacrilegious nor unpatriotic, but the “Pilgrims and Indians” did not throw a feast simply to celebrate the abundance of food that they had; rather, they joined together to offer thanks. They remembered the difficult journey across the ocean, the fierce winter, ravaging

¹Pilgrim Hall Museum, “About the Pilgrims: The ‘First Thanksgiving’ at Plymouth,” available online at: http://www.pilgrimhallmuseum.org/ap_first_thanksgiving.htm.

disease, hunger, and death—all of the hardships they had endured—and they thanked God for bringing them through it all.

In what is truly one of those I-wish-I-had-said-that articles in *The Christian Century*, Martin Copenhaver, President of Andover-Newton Theological Seminary wrote,

Thankfulness has no direct correlation to abundance. If there were such a correlation, if we were given some abundance, we would be somewhat thankful, and if we were given more abundance, we would be more thankful. But it doesn't work that way, does it?²

President Copenhaver certainly gives me something to think about. Compared to most of the world, all of us live in abundance. In this time and place, we work hard and gather in just about anything that we want. We do not have to be necessarily thankful because for most of us, if we lose what we have, we can get more. As Copenhaver illustrates, in an episode of *The Simpsons*, when young Bart is asked to offer thanks before a meal, he says, "Dear God, we bought all of this stuff with our own money, so thanks for nothing."³

Such an attitude is unsettling, but we do not have to look very far in our world to see find people who have abundantly more than everyone else and yet feel as if it is all of their own doing. I am not suggesting that you and I feel that way about our possessions or place in life; however, I know that if I am honest, there have been times I have felt that way myself.

The Apostle Paul urged his friends to "give thanks in all circumstances" (I Thessalonians 5:18), which is what I think the Pilgrims and Indians did. They were grateful when they had a good enough harvest to see them through the winter and they were grateful when rains brought an end to a drought which limited their food. Their response was simply to give thanks.

In 1936, as the country began to emerge from the most difficult years of the Great Depression, Johnny Burke and Arthur Johnston wrote a song which reminded people that blessings can be found in difficult times. They

²Martin B. Copenhaver, "Learning to Give Thanks," *The Christian Century* (November 11, 2015): 32; excerpted from his book *Room to Grow: Meditations on Trying to Live as a Christian* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

³Copenhaver, 32.

suggested that the consequence of ingratitude is an inability to see our blessings and challenging times may be one way to discover them again. The surprise is that God provides the currency to enable us to experience the blessings that are ours. That currency is gratitude in the difficult times. Listen to the lyrics of “Pennies from Heaven”:

A long time ago, a million years BC
The best things in life were absolutely free.
But no one appreciated a sky that was always blue
And no one congratulated a moon that was always new.

So it was planned that they would vanish now and then
And you must pay before you get them back again.
That's what storms were made for
And you shouldn't be afraid for

Every time it rains it rains
Pennies from heaven.
Don't you know each cloud contains
Pennies from heaven.

You'll find your fortune falling all over town.
Be sure that your umbrella is upside down.
Trade them for a package of sunshine and flowers.
If you want the things you love

You must have showers.
So when you hear it thunder
Don't run under a tree.
There'll be pennies from heaven for you and me.⁴

I think that James the Apostle said it best when he wrote, “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (James 1:17) or, as our choir just sang, “All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above. So thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all his love.”⁵

Perhaps it is true that at times we cannot see our blessings because of our ingratitude. It may well be that the storms of life open our eyes to

⁴Johnny Burke and Arthur Johnston, “Pennies from Heaven,” © Warner/Chappell Music, Inc., 1936.

⁵Matthias Claudius (1740–1815).

recognize the many ways God provides for us in lean times and better times. Send a child into a large toy store and she will be hard pressed to find one toy she likes above all of the other toys. Hand a child who has been on a boat drifting in the Aegean Sea a teddy bear and he will cling to it tightly. It is not abundance we celebrate, but provision in all times of life.

It is a matter of giving thanks, something we have to learn and remember. Copenhaver points out that parents remind their children over and over to thank other people for kind things they do. Gratitude often has to be taught and giving thanks is a task suited for each and every day. We give thanks, not so much for the abundance, but for the provision of what we need at the time.

Martin Copenhaver shares with us the story of John Kralik, worthy of hearing in his words. Listen:

In an intriguing book called *365 Thank You's*, John Kralik writes about writing a thank-you note a day for an entire year. He didn't resolve to write all of those thank-you notes at a time when he was feeling particularly grateful. In fact, it was at a particularly low time in his life. His small law firm was losing money and losing its lease. He was going through a difficult divorce. He lived in a small, stuffy apartment where he often slept on the floor under an ancient air conditioner. He was middle-aged, overweight, and at the end of his rope.

Then, one day, he got lost on a mountain hike and didn't know how to get home. By the time he found his way down the mountain he had a plan. He would write a thank-you note each day for a year. He writes, "My only problem: Did I have anything to be grateful for? The way my life was going, I hardly thought so."

But he got started, by writing notes to the people close to him, his family and friends. Then it got harder. "One day," he writes, "I just couldn't think of anybody to thank." He stopped at his regular Starbucks, where the barista greeted him by name—"John, your usual venti?"—and with a big smile. Kralik reflected, "I thought, this is really kind of a great gift in this day and age of impersonal relationships, that someone had cared enough to learn my name and what I drank in the morning." So

he wrote the barista a thank-you note. And so it went through the year. Each day a thank-you note, each day a day of thanksgiving.

Kralik says the experience of expressing thanks day in and day out changed the way he approached life. It even got him to church:

I had considered myself something of an atheist for years, but I started going to this church [near the end of that year]. The music was plentiful, delivered with . . . genuine enthusiasm. The dominant message was that grace was still available. To everyone. Even to me. I can deal with that, I thought. Through the process of writing thank-you notes, I had developed a notion of being blessed with grace.⁶

The Pilgrims were actually some of the first immigrants to this land, people of faith escaping persecution, hoping for a better life in a free land. The Native Americans understood that The Great Spirit, as they referred to God, provided everything they needed, and they were grateful. The first two celebrations which led eventually to our national Thanksgiving holiday were spontaneous occasions of gratitude for all that God does for us in lean times as well as times of plenty. It was natural for the Pilgrims and the Indians to offer thanks to God because they did it so often. There was no question that all good gifts come from God.

It would be a good thing for us, this week and every week, today and every day, to take the time to look around, turn our umbrellas upside down, and notice that the rain and the sunshine and all good gifts come from God our Heavenly Father, like pennies from heaven—and then offer thanksgiving. Thanks be to God! Amen.

⁶Copenhaver, 34.

November 22, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We gather together to offer praise and thanksgiving, O God: praise because you are the Lord of all creation, the King over a domain of love, and thanksgiving because you have blessed us in so many ways. Even at this early hour there is so much for which to be thankful: a night's rest, the sunshine of a new day, a nutritious breakfast, a cup of coffee, the morning paper, the touch of a loved one's caress. We thank you for friends who sit beside and around us, for prayers offered for those dear to us, for the comfort of knowing that we are not alone in whatever battles we might fight today. Our cups are overflowing with your goodness, O God, and we are thankful.

Once again you have listened to the list of our friends who have special needs and to the litany running through each of our minds of those people and concerns which need your help. Once again you are already moving to answer those prayers, even the ones we cannot speak. We are also mindful that we may well be the answer to our own prayers and seek your guidance in how we might best respond to the needs around us. Continue your grace in all of our lives, we pray, and provide for us those things that we truly need.

We ask your blessing as we travel and join with family and friends this week. These are not always easy and pleasant times for us, and we seek your grace in making these days meaningful for us. Surprise us with moments when old grudges fall away, hardened scars soften and stretch, and love that has been buried deep within escapes if for only a little while.

We ask for your help with our world, O God. It is far too dangerous and out of control for our work alone. Breathe your Spirit upon all flesh, swirl your grace among us and teach us new ways of seeking what we want and getting what we need. Root out our hatred and open our hearts to understand that other people in the world are our brothers and our sisters.

You give us much cause for thanksgiving, O God, and we are grateful. Help us to live as such, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.