

“Thanks-giving”
Thanksgiving and Christ the King Sunday
22 November, 2015
Joel 2:21-27
1 Timothy 2:1-7
Matthew 6:24-34
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This was another difficult week in international news. The Paris terrorist attacks are still incredibly raw, and the siege on the Radisson Blu Hotel in Bamako, Mali, that targeted Western guests and visitors has only served to heighten anxiety, particularly about anyone who looks Middle Eastern, or North African, and especially if they appear to be Muslim.

Suicidal fanatics are carrying out increasing numbers of assaults on soil and on peoples that feel familiar, as well as in lands that are both culturally and geographically foreign. And they’re as eager to end their own life as they are to kill and maim as many others as possible because they’ve bought into some wicked false teaching that what they’re doing is holy, sanctified, somehow blessed by God.

The most immediate and natural sentient response to things that threaten us is fear, suspicion, mistrust; our basic, instinctive, self-preserving reaction is to recoil and back away. Or, to push away that which feels foreign or threatening, often with a great show of force and self-aggrandizement. If we pay attention, we’ll recognize the patterns: there are plenty of other animals in the natural world that demonstrate how people behave when we give in to mere instinct.

It is very rare—if it ever happens, I don’t know—for an animal to pause and express gratitude or appreciation when they’re feeling under threat. I just don’t think it occurs to most animals to count their blessings when they’re anxious.

And, on balance, I think the same is true of human beings. Sure, we tend to be good about demonstrating good manners: saying “please” and “thank you”. But if we check ourselves as a culture, a prevailing attitude of self-importance and entitlement is much more visible than one of genuine gratitude. We tend to be more prone to finding fault with what is, than to giving thanks for it. We’re more inclined to pursue what we *don’t* have than we are to appreciate every little thing we *do* have: from the gift of a waking breath, to the ability to see or smell or taste or hear—even when what we see, smell, taste, or hear is relatively unpleasant—to the incredibly privileged lifestyles we enjoy when compared to the majority of the world’s people.

We’re not the first generation to behave this way. Our Old Testament reading this morning comes from the prophecy of Joel, written sometime between 500-350 BCE. The passage we heard, from the second half of Chapter Two, has been called an “Oracle of

Salvation” by biblical scholars. However, the first part of Chapter Two, as well as the entire first chapter, lays out the justification for Israel’s experience of divine judgment.

Their covenant with God required that they live in close relationship with God, acknowledging the Source of all that they enjoyed, and obeying God’s rules for a life that was life-giving, respectful of all life—including that of the animals and the land. But the people of Israel chose to disobey, pursuing easier pleasures and baser instincts. And their whole world suffered as a result.

As the late Elizabeth Achtemeier wrote in the *New Interpreter’s Bible*, “God willed for humankind to have abundant life, but that abundant life is possible only in relationship with God. Otherwise we know only chaos, darkness, evil, and finally the void of death. When people deserted God and tried to make God unnecessary, turning to other sources for life, they brought upon themselves the sterility, hopelessness, lack of joy, and threat of annihilation that Joel so vividly pictures. Worst, they brought on the wrath of God.”¹

The people to whom this prophecy was originally issued were feeling the blunt end of the Babylonian army’s force. A well-armed and organized military had risen up out of a nation the Jewish people once considered an ally; the Babylonians invaded Judah, destroyed Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem, brutalized the Jewish people, and threatened their very existence as a community of faith, to say nothing of their identity as a people.

Some, including the prophet Joel, interpreted these events as evidence of God’s judgment—as divine punishment for neglecting their covenantal agreements with Yahweh.

Based on my understanding of God’s character and ways, expressed throughout the pages of Scripture, I’m not as confident as Joel was that the people were experiencing God’s wrath so much as they were experiencing the result of their own short-sightedness, selfishness, and failure to remember God’s goodness. The choices we make (or that our leaders make on our behalf), when not grounded in love and wisdom, often have far-reaching negative results.

Still, the verses that we heard were words of consolation, reassurance, and gratitude—genuine thanksgiving that the wrath of God does not last forever. Ultimately, as the prophet says, divine punishment always relents [or, as I see it, God always prevails in time over the forces of chaos and destruction that are a natural result of our human selfishness] and God enfolds Her people with forgiveness and compassion, offering yet another fresh start—a renewed invitation to begin again.

Always, the invitation is to turn back to God; to acknowledge the sovereignty of the Creator and almighty Giver of all that is. This will inevitably induce an attitude of humble gratitude, as well as the experience of salvation that comes from living in daily relationship with Him.

¹ *New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. VII, pp. 309, 325.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus admonishes his followers to pay attention to their devotions. The specific challenge he issues is that no one can be devoted both to God and to wealth. He follows that up by acknowledging what a devotion to wealth over God can bring on: worry.

But, as most of us here know, worry isn't confined to fretting over what the stock market's doing. You don't have to be wealthy or completely destitute to wonder where your next meal's going to come from. Or whether you'll have warm enough clothes to weather a long, Arctic winter.

Few things get in the way of thanks-giving more effectively than worry. But the good news is that even fewer things can destroy worry more effectively than giving thanks.

Think about it: when you're busy worrying, are you usually feeling grateful? Constant gratitude isn't easy, particularly when we're in the clutches of anxiety. Or when we're focused on what we *don't* have more intently than what we *do*. Jesus recognized this. He pointed out the birds and the flowers: see how faithfully God takes care of them? Don't you think you're worth at least as much as they are? We sanctify that which we thank God for—we mark it as holy, sacred, as a God-given gift. So, Jesus is saying, focus your attention on what's in front of you, give thanks for it; do not fear what hasn't happened to you. Give thanks for the abundance you do enjoy, the life you're living and learning from. Give thanks for the fact that you're safe, and that you have sanctuary to offer to others. Thank God that you live in a land with abundant resources. Resources abundant enough to share with those who are desperate and have little or none of their own.

Remember, we are the creatures made in God's own image: and time and again throughout Scripture and our faith tradition, we hear about how God's generosity is endless; God's goodness is fearless—because, as 1 John 4:18 reminds us, perfect love casts out all fear. As those created in the image and likeness of God, do we not resemble God most when we are generous in every way?

Today, our church is observing our annual Thanksgiving Sunday celebration. This is also the last Sunday of the liturgical year. Next week, on the first Sunday of Advent (there are always four), we begin a new liturgical cycle. Liturgy literally means “the work of the people”—but it also includes the way we tell our story as Christians. As liturgical seasons return to the beginning of our faith narrative, our scripture readings will help us recognize, or remember, our need for a Savior.

This week, however, at the very end of the liturgical year, we proclaim with thanksgiving that the Savior we need and have received in the Church, has been given as God's gift to the whole world. Here's how the author of 1 Timothy put it, according to *The Message* translation:

“[God] wants not only us but *everyone* saved, you know, everyone to get to know the truth *we've* learned: that there's one God and only one, and one Priest-Mediator between

God and us—Jesus, who offered himself in exchange for everyone held captive by sin, to set them all free.” (1 Timothy 2:4-5, *The Message*)

So, for many congregations across the world, the focus is on the pinnacle and culminating proclamation of the Church: we call it the Feast of Christ the King, and we celebrate the Reign of Christ. God in Christ has proven that there is no greater power or authority than that of Love—not even death.

We live in complex times—many would argue, far more politically complex than Old or New Testament times. There are moments when it feels like the United States is burdened with the responsibility, (or at least the expectation of much of the world including many of our own citizens), of both policing and protecting not only our own citizens, but also those of other countries—particularly those in crisis.

It can feel overwhelming, which is why the advice we heard at the beginning of our reading from 1 Timothy is still wise and relevant to this day: “The first thing I want you to do is pray. Pray every way you know how [supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings/NRSV], pray for everyone you know. Pray especially for rulers and their governments to rule well so we can be quietly about our business of living simply, in humble contemplation. This is the way our Savior God wants us to live.” (1 Timothy 2:1-4)

Serious political unrest, terror, and social vulnerability was real for each of the original audiences of the three scripture passages we heard this morning. God’s faithful people have always known varying degrees of threat and insecurity—which is inevitably accompanied by the temptation to fear, to worry, to either retreat, or to attack.

But the Bible is clear and consistent: God gives, and gives, and keeps on giving—even when we spurn the gifts, or forget the Giver, or presume that we’ve somehow acquired the things we enjoy entirely by our own ingenuity. Our fear and selfishness frequently contributes to the demise of our own security and experience of salvation because we have turned away from tending first and foremost to our relationship with God.

As beings created in God’s own image, we are made to be givers. Thanks-givers, and thankful givers: bestowers of a God-sized generosity and welcome—especially to the persecuted, the powerless, and the vulnerable ones.

Our example, the one whom we claim as Sovereign and Savior, is Jesus Christ—God’s own Son—who gave everything, fearing nothing and no one. Refusing to indulge the temptation to worry, trusting completely in God’s love and power, he reached out to those whom the rest of the world feared and despised. And the diabolical ones he named and identified for who and what they were.

This week, and in the Advent season to come, I challenge each one of us (I’m going to work on this, too!) to pay attention to our thoughts and words: make an effort to respond to every thought of fear or suspicion with a thought that includes *two* things for which you’re thankful. And if you’re still feeling fearful or anxious, then name three or five things

for which you give thanks. Just see whether the practice of turning toward God and giving thanks with that sort of attention and determination, doesn't just come back around and give *you* a more peaceful heart.

Happy Thanks-giving, friends! Amen.