

November 19, 2000
Thanksgiving Sunday
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A Deeper Thanksgiving

Philippians 4:4-13 ...for I have learned to be content with
whatever I have.

Many years ago, when we lived in Kentucky, a friend and I were on a retreat for ministers at a beautiful state park. We took a walk together one afternoon. At one point, we found ourselves standing on a bluff overlooking a sparkling blue lake, surrounded by trees ablaze with autumn colors, the sunlight flashing on the surface of the water. The grace and beauty of the sunlit autumn afternoon washed over us. We stood there in sublime silence.

Looking down at the lake, my friend broke the silence: "If we only had a boat." We looked at each other and broke into laughter. We both realized the absurdity of his comment. We are never satisfied. Was it not enough to be bathed in that glorious autumn afternoon, embraced by all the beauty the world has to offer? In a humorous way, we had touched upon a spiritual dilemma that is wide-spread in our society and world. There exist many obstacles to our being thankful people.

Our dissatisfaction is an obstacle to thankfulness. There is an acquisitive spirit that pervades our world, and the church itself. We've been duped into believing that the full life has to do with having a great many things--money, status, admirers, success. How can we be thankful people if we are never satisfied? The Thanksgiving season can be a time to quiet our never-satisfied spirits so that we can learn to be content with what we have, or don't have. An important spiritual lesson is simply this: enough IS enough!

Sometimes our dissatisfaction is with the world around us, or with people. One day some years ago, I was having lunch with a colleague, Rabbi Morris Shapiro, of Agudath Sholom Synagogue, in Lynchburg, Virginia. That day I was feeling stressed and frustrated in my work. I fell into complaining about the church and people in general. After I had finished my complaints, the rabbi said in a gently chastening way, "My friend, you must learn to accept the world as it is, not as you want it to be."

There is much that is wrong with the world. As conscientious Christians, we need to be involved in making this world better. But often we become obsessed with what we think is wrong, finding fault with everything and everyone, including ourselves. We want the world to be as we want it to be, not as it is. Our non-acceptance of life, of others, and of ourselves is another obstacle to thankfulness.

For us as Christians, God's presence in Jesus Christ is God's profound acceptance of the world. "God so LOVED the world that he gave his only son...." God so LOVED the world, a world that is a mixture of good and evil, beauty and ugliness, a world full of people like

ourselves who are generous and greedy, self-giving and self-centered, capable of great kindness and of great cruelty. But it all begins with grace, the love of God unconditionally poured out upon the world in Christ.

If God so loves the world, can we do any less? If we love with the love of God, that very love gives rise to the desire to help, to heal, to enable change to happen out of love, not out of a demanding and judgmental spirit. If we attempt to change the world without doing so out of love, we only compound the misery of the world.

Another obstacle to thanksgiving is the pace of life we live. Our dissatisfaction leads us to frantic busy-ness, never leaving spaces for quietness and peace, spaces in which God can touch us, give us peace, instill a deeper wisdom and view of things. Hear these wonderful words from Isaiah 30: "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength." When we create space in our lives for prayer, for silence, for reflection, we allow our spirits to "breathe." We learn to let go of anxiety over the future and guilt over the past. We become more able to discern, as the famous prayer of Richard Neibuhr says, the things we can change and the things we cannot change. In this way, we learn more and more what it means to trust God and to entrust our lives, the lives of others, and the life of the world to God.

When we take time for prayerful silence and reflection, we remember. And memory is very important for thankfulness. Israel's faith was based upon remembering, remembering what God had done in Egypt to bring Israel out of slavery. If we are constantly pressing forward, anxiously grasping for new things and new experiences, we lose touch with what has already happened in our lives to enrich us. If our spirits always seeking something more, then we lose touch with the fullness of our lives--the people in our past, and present who have given us love or hope, direction or encouragement, the events in our lives that have given us meaning and purpose, joy and deeper understanding.

Memory is central to our faith. When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we remember Christ, his life, death, and resurrection, and the new life God gives us in him. The Greek word for "remember" in the New Testament is anamnesis, literally "not forgetting." We know how important it is to not forget God's love for us and the world. Remembering, we become thankful.

One last obstacle to thanksgiving and thankful living. Some of us may come to this Thanksgiving season experiencing difficult things--grief, emotional struggles, physical illness, or just plain depression. Someone we know and love may be experiencing these things. And certainly God's beloved world is filled with continuing pain: wars, racial and ethnic violence and hate, the terrible suffering of African peoples because of HIV/AIDS, and more. How do we speak of thankfulness when we don't "feel" thankful?

When Paul wrote his letter to the Christian community in Phillipi, he was in prison. The church at Phillipi had sent him a gift out of their concern and love. Paul was deeply touched by this gift. And he thanked them for it. However, he went on to talk about a deeper thanksgiving, a thanksgiving that goes beyond feelings and is something like a disposition of one's very spirit. "I rejoice in the Lord greatly now at last you have revived your concern for me...Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of being in need. I can do all things through God who strengthens me."

These are words of thanksgiving, even though the word is not found as such. I think the contentment Paul spoke of is that deeper thanksgiving. It comes from a life firmly rooted in God. The word "content" in the Greek has the literal meaning of "self-sufficient." Paul is saying that he appreciates the gift that was sent, and the love behind it. But he is "self-sufficient." He doesn't depend upon the kindness. Now, what Paul was talking about is not the kind of "self-sufficiency" we often mean. He wasn't talking about not needing anyone or always going it alone. He meant a self-sufficiency that comes from being closely and deeply connected with God.

Paul had entrusted his life to God, not to the circumstances of life around him. He was able to face plenty and want, times of well-being and of deprivation because he had been following Christ. He had been giving up everything he thought was important for the surpassing worth of new life in Christ, a life of God's grace and God's call to love, to serve, to give. It was because Paul had already given up everything that the ups and downs of life, the good times and the bad times, the fortune and the misfortune could not disturb the balance in his spirit. Such a faith comes when we live deeply into our communion with God, who becomes less and less an idea and increasingly a reality that pervades our lives.

In a few moments we will sing one of the most remarkable hymns in the church. The words were written by Martin Rinkart, a German pastor who lived in the seventeenth century. During the Thirty Years' War(1618-1648), Rinkart was the lone pastor remaining in the town of Eilenburg. At one point, he conducted funeral services for forty to fifty people each day, people who had died from the war or diseases intensified by the war. Here I cannot help but think of pastors in southern Africa right now who are burying hundreds of people in their towns and villages because of the AIDS epidemic.

It was during this worst of times that pastor Rinkart penned the words of this hymn as a table grace for his family. The simplicity and heart-felt thankfulness stand in awesome contrast to the circumstances of Rinkart's life and the lives of the German people.

Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices,
who wondrous things has done, in whom the world rejoices,
who from our mothers' arms, has blessed us on our way

with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

May we continue to seek and to grow in this faith, a faith that creates in us a deeper thanksgiving that is rooted in God. For God gives us all we truly need and sustains us in all times and in all circumstances.