

“Think - and Be Thankful”
Deuteronomy 16:13-17
November 18, 2018

This IS the time of year when the buttons on a Congregationalist’s coat are in danger of popping off, when we swell with a little more pride than usual. For even though Thanksgiving is an American holiday, Congregationalism reminds us that the very first people to offer Thanksgiving to God on our shores as a community were also the first Congregationalists to come here, back in 1620 at Plymouth Rock.

And so we celebrate not only our American heritage, but our spiritual heritage as a community of faith. This day IS distinctly American. But it is also unique: as someone has pointed out, this holiday we are about to celebrate remembers no savage battle or the fall of a great city. It does not mark the anniversary of a great conqueror or the birthday of a famous politician. It does not commemorate the writing of a historic public document or the launching of a new constitution. It is, rather, a Condition of the Heart, a Pilgrimage of the Spirit, to a sense of Gratitude. There is no other day like it celebrated anywhere. Consider: we are the direct spiritual heirs to that Condition of the Heart. Think! Are we thankful?

The Congregational principle that led to the celebration of this day is one where it is up to each and every individual to ponder and reflect upon, to review, what our own personal relationship with God is. No human agency can tell us what to believe, or how to believe. But that does not mean that we believe whatever we like - or even nothing at all. It rather means that there is laid upon our shoulders a great responsibility for our own personal faith, our own personal

salvation. No one can make our pilgrimage for us. No one can be blamed but ourselves for our shortcomings or our mistakes. For Congregationalism celebrates the freedom of individuals to think for ourselves, and to approach our God in full confidence that the promise of scripture - "Whosoever will may come" - does not demand anything from us but the love of our heart, our soul, our mind, and our strength. Yes, we are to think for ourselves. To think - and thus to be thankful.

Although Thanksgiving as a national holiday is our own, its spirit has gone on long before us. The Psalms of the ancient Israelites are full of praises given in thanksgiving. Their harvest festival and Hag Sukkoth are forerunners of our own feast this coming Thursday.

How were these Israelites thankful? Consider their history - sandwiched between two great superpowers of the ancient world, Egypt and Syria, they seldom enjoyed full independence. Set upon by Philistines and Hittites, Damascenes and Edomites, they were rarely at peace. Our world, protected as we are by economic, military, and (yes) moral power - our world is a picnic compared to theirs. And yet, Israel gave thanks. They were no strangers to famine; yet they gave thanks. They were often set upon by forces greater than they; yet they gave thanks. Their nation was divided, and was ultimately swallowed up by empire after empire for hundreds of years. Yet they still give thanks. How could they DO that? What is their secret? What have they known, in their history, that we in our comfort and prosperity today all too readily forget?

Israel has never forgotten the good things: the joy of God's creation, the love of parent and child, the peace of the inward heart, a God who rewards faithfulness. Israel does not forget. They consider. They ponder. They think. And they are thankful.

For you see, thinking and thanking are very much related to each other. It is no accident that in the history of our English language, 'think' and 'thank' come from the same linguistic root, and have in common a shared meaning. For our people reflect in our speech the knowledge that if we truly think, we WILL be thankful. Think of good things, and be thankful. Think of what we have - compared to what we might really deserve - and be thankful. Think of how much worse things could be, even if our situation right now is not all that we would want it to be ... and be thankful.

All too easily we are ready to forget or take for granted the good things, while we grouse and mumble and complain about the bad. It has been said that a contented person is the one who enjoys the scenery along the detours. Or for that matter, no one ever injured their eyesight by looking on the bright side of life.

This is not to say that we should all become Pollyannas, ignoring the danger signs and warning signals that life gives us along the way. For trouble there is in this world, and trouble there will be in our living. There will be many things that we would find it hard to be thankful for. But while a ship in the harbor may be safe, that is not what ships are built for. It is often through the storms out on the open seas of life that our sense of thankfulness is honed.

Now what of our Pilgrim forebears? They wanted their children to remember the sacrifice, the suffering, the hardships which made possible the settlement of a free people in a free land. They wanted to keep alive the memory of that long, 63-day trip taken in the tiny Mayflower. They desired to keep alive the thought of that stern and rock-bound New England coastline, its inhospitable welcome, and the first terrible winter which took such a toll on their lives. They did not want their descendents to forget that on the day in which their ration was

reduced to only five grains of corn, only seven healthy colonists remained to nurse the sick, and nearly half their numbers lay in the 'windswept graveyard' on the hill overlooking the bay. But most of all, they did not want us to forget that when the Mayflower sailed back to England in the spring, not a single colonist fled back to 'safety' - only the sailors were on board. The Pilgrims wanted us to think - and then, like them, to be thankful.

We are called to do the same today: to reflect, to consider all that we have - and all that we might become. To ponder all the blessings that have been given - and all the blessings which we might bestow upon others. To think about what our faith has meant to us and to our families, as well as what a living faith might do for our neighbors, our community, our world. For we give thanks not only for ourselves and what we have, but we give thanks for the opportunity to share those things with others, that they, too, might give thanks.

Let us then all think of how we might make this place a more thankful place, a credit to its Pilgrim heritage, a jewel in the crown of the Kingdom. Think intelligently. Then speak prophetically. And act with strength divine, so that the Spirit of Thanksgiving might more easily reign in the hearts of all persons everywhere.

Let us pray: