

Thanks
1 Thessalonians 5:16-18
Colebrook Congregational Church
November 22, 2015 / Thanksgiving Sunday

Throughout history and the world, there have been many kinds of thanksgiving celebrations. They celebrate the harvest or mark a significant event that had happened, like a good harvest, a military victory, or the end of a drought, and were generally one time events. The first Thanksgiving celebration that we recognize as starting this annual feast by our theological ancestors, the Pilgrims, was in 1621 in Plymouth, Massachusetts.

When the Pilgrims landed the year before, they found themselves in the wrong place. Their ship went off course on their way to Virginia and they were also running out of beer to drink, so they made landfall at the first land they could find, which was Cape Cod. When they landed, they founded a scene out of a post-apocalyptic horror film. Back in the 1520s, a French-sponsored exploration expedition found that the east coast was densely populated by native tribes, but by the time the Pilgrims arrived just less than a century later, the deadliest plague in human history had wiped out well over 90% of the native population.

The Pilgrims found a full constructed town in what they would they would call Plymouth, but it was no longer populated. A ghost town...and they just moved in. The local great chief just happened to have among his tribe a man named Squanto, who was from that town, who survived the plague because he was captured by a British sea captain and sold into slavery in England just prior to its arrival, escaping during a return expedition led by Captain Smith, returning just after it. Because Squanto could speak English, the Sachem of the Wampanoag Tribe, Massasoit, sent Squanto to be his liaison with the settlers and to help them survive, because the conditions were not good, and half the Pilgrims that landed ended up dying during that first year. Squanto was sent to help them cultivate the abandoned town's farmlands, and slowly, they were able to start growing their own food. Also in that first year, Massasoit had difficulties with a renegade tribesman, which led to a battle where the Pilgrims had sent some of their own men to assist their native allies.

So, the combination of the Pilgrims being able to grow and the harvest the food that they needed to survive and the Wampanoag achieving a military victory over an enemy, led the Pilgrims to plan a three day Thanksgiving feast. They had all the harvested foods, corn, squashes, grains, potatoes, fruits, and they sent out hunters for all types of fowl, especially turkeys, and the Wampanoags contributed other game, like venison.

The first Thanksgivings were considered religious holidays, but they soon became a civil holiday, and as it turned out, they were held almost every other year due to frequent drought or famines and then they celebrated the return of bounty, usually the next year. It wasn't until 1680 that it became an annual holiday.

Furthermore, in my opinion, this has led to one thing that makes us Congregationalists unique, is the emphasis on food. At nearly every gathering we have, not just on Sundays, we have food that we share with each other. This is just my opinion, but I think it is because of this early time, when we did not always have enough to eat, and so we gave truly heartfelt thanks to God for the times of plenty, and celebrated this with the sharing of food. Many of my colleagues disagree with me, so take it as you will.

Today's reading comes from Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians. This letter is considered to be Paul's first letter (that we have), written in 52, and is the oldest book of the New Testament. Paul had only spent a few weeks in Thessaloniki before continuing on to Athens, so he was worried about how the church he started there was faring. He sent his companion Timothy, the same Timothy a couple of other Epistles are named for, to go visit that church and report back to Paul. This letter is his response to that report.

Paul was mostly happy with the Thessalonians, but he wanted to correct a couple misunderstandings and give encouragements. One of those encouragements is the subject for today: thankfulness.

Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Be thankful in all circumstances. These are some of the traits of a follower of Jesus, Paul tells the Thessalonians.

Thankful in all circumstances. That could be a bit much if taken too far, as to the point of being disingenuous. My perennial complaint about this happened for the first time this season last Tuesday at my one shift at Barnes & Noble. While talking with an assistant manager off to one side, the Nook lead rang out a customer and asked if they would donate a \$4 book to a local sick kid. The customer said, “No, but thank you so very much.” The cashier went silent, I bristled, and the assistant manager rolled her eyes and sighed. We're in for two months of that overly effluent fake gratitude. I remember last year, after the first month of hearing that, it was very difficult not to have a facial reaction. I do not believe that this is what Paul meant when he said be thankful in all things. Mostly because of the lack of true sincerity.

Sometimes, it can be hard to find something to be thankful for. I saw a single-panel comic hung in the vestibule of the Congregational church up in Otis. I do not remember the picture, and I could not find it online, but the caption was: “Do not be angry with God for making the cheetah fast, thank God for not giving the cheetah wings.”

I challenge myself to always try to find something to be thankful for. I remember a speaker at Divinity School, on the subject of prayer, say that God is not a cosmic cash machine, and so one should always start their prayers with a thank you to God. That advice has been useful to me, because that skill easily translates from praying to the rest of life. Not starting a prayer until I could think of something to thank God for helped me to be thankful at other times.

When we give truly felt thanks, especially when we go out of our way or have gone through some extra effort to express it, it has an effect on both the giver and the receiver. The receiver is pleased and also feels appreciated by others; and the giver, makes things well, maybe even works a miracle or changes a life with their true expression of gratitude.

It's been a long year. But a fruitful one. We have a lot to be thankful for at this church this past year. Our attendance, our participation, and our membership have grown. We have new programs, adult Christian Ed & Bible study, community dinners every month, an inter-church youth program and special services. Our Meetinghouse is more active during the week. We are more active in the community and are working together with other community organizations. We provide food for those in need of assistance. And we have a wonderful new organist.

All of us have worked hard this past year, and we should never forget to occasionally stop and turn to one another, and say, THANK YOU.

Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

[PAUSE]

Generous God, for the abundance of your blessings to us, day by day and year by year, we give you our thanks. For the simple pleasures of life and familiar surroundings, for health and strength to appreciate the wonder of life, for needs met and fulfilled, we give you our thanks. For food to nourish body and spirit, for homes which supply shelter and offer hospitality, we give you our thanks. With our gifts reaching farther than we can manage alone, with deeds done in service of neighbor and stranger, with family and friends distant and nearby, we worship You with grateful hearts and joyful spirit.

God of consolation, How lovely are the ways You clear for us and the respite You bring us on our spiritual journeys. We do not want for anything. But this world can be dark and enticing, clouding our vision and leading us astray, so we pray for Your guidance.

We pray for all who are too jealous to be thankful, who complain, and who are always comparing themselves with those who have more. For all who have forgotten how to say thank you. For all who are too busy to be thankful. For all who are grudgingly thankful. For all who are too tired to be thankful, and who have no energy to open their eyes to the blessings around them. For all who are barely thankful; who say the words, but don't feel grateful in their hearts.

We pray for the many who do not have enough: enough food to eat, or shelter to keep warm; enough employment, or money to pay bills; enough medicine or care.

We especially pray for:

The people of France, Nigeria, and Mali; and for the refugees fleeing the violence of the Middle East.

O God, May our expressions of gratitude never deafen us to the cries of those in need; and in celebrating Your love may we never forget that Your love reaches others through us. Amen.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

16 Rejoice always,

17 pray without ceasing,

18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.