Companions for Thanksgiving

Third in our series; Humble Prayers for Thanksgiving

# Scripture: 1 Chronicles 29:10-14; 1 Timothy 6:6-19

# Key thought: Gratitude always dines with humility and generosity.

# Intro:

I would like us to think of some special Thanksgiving dinners that we have been a part of. I remember one year JoAnne and I were guests at an early Thanksgiving dinner party at Keely’s house in South Bend, Indiana where she was at that time a grad student at Notre Dame. The tables were placed end to end and elegantly set for many guests. Eight or ten of her friends from the graduate school had been invited. The turkey was in the oven. The potatoes were mashed. Delicious-looking dishes arrived one after another with the arriving guests. Baked brie cheeses for appetizers; Shannon’s pepper jack spinach and sweet potato that tasted like candy; then Jackie’s apple pie. As we all gathered around the table, I led in a prayer of Thanksgiving. It was a great time as the din of multiple conversations filled the house until late in the evening.

The last two years, Thanksgiving dinner has been a little less ambitious, but no less as enjoyable, as JoAnne and I have hosted our daughter and her family at the parsonage for Thanksgiving, as we plan to do this week. The chatter of two little grandchildren will definitely keep it from being too quiet at our house on Thanksgiving.

That’s one thing about Thanksgiving. We don’t like to eat alone on Thanksgiving. Let’s just take an informal poll. How many of you are planning to have at least one guest outside your immediate family at your table for Thanksgiving dinner, whether or not it’s on the day? How many of you are having or attending a big Thanksgiving dinners with say eight or more people? Well, this just goes to show that we like giving thanks together.

But however many people are at the table, the object at Thanksgiving dinner, is to have an attitude of Thanksgiving! Duh! This is Thanksgiving. We don’t want it to be just a big party or big dinner. We want this special day to be a day of counting our blessings, of recognizing how thankful we are to God for all that he has given to us in all the good things that we enjoy.

At my childhood home, one way my parents made sure that we had the right attitude was to ask each one in turn around the table to name one thing they were especially thankful for. Then Dad would say grace recognizing God’s blessings.

As the family grew in numbers, Mom always had little favors with our names on them so we would know where to sit. These decorative little favors often followed a theme. Another way to emphasize the attitude of thanksgiving might be to have these place markers each contain a scripture verse of praise like.

“Give thanks to the Lord for his is good. His love endures forever.” Psalm 136:1

Well, this morning, just like we do not like to dine alone at Thanksgiving dinner, so I would suggest to you that the attitude of true thanksgiving does not dine alone either. Being thankful is not a solitary characteristic. It does not stand alone. Our friend, Gratitude has two close companions who always travel with him or her. Wherever the attitude of Gratitude dwells, you will always find these two close friends nearby. Their names are Humility and Generosity. This morning I would like to talk about these to two companions of Thanksgiving and how closely related they are to him or her.

# Humility before God

Humility is a very close partner to thanksgiving. The very act of thanking God implies that we are deeply indebted to him. That means we can’t take all the credit ourselves, we must humble ourselves and acknowledge that God has given us the abilities we have; he has placed us in favorable circumstances; he has blessed us in so many ways.

St. Paul’s command is to the point.

“Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.” 1 Tim 6:17

David was even more specific,

1 Chron 29:12-14 “Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. Now, our God, we give you thanks… Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.” NIV

Before Jesus came, the Jewish people were already celebrating a fall festival called Sukkot which they still celebrate today. Here’s what it is about.

For Jewish people, Thanksgiving Day is eclipsed by the biblical Festival of Sukkot(also known as the Festival of Booths or Tabernacles). This eight-day celebration occurs in the fall (Sukkot 2017 – Oct. 4-11)

and draws its inspiration from Leviticus 23:33–34, "The LORD said to Moses, 'Say to the Israelites: 'On the fifteenth day of the seventh month the LORD's Feast of Tabernacles begins, and it lasts for seven days.'" This holiday occurs four days after Yom Kippur, a somber time of introspection, repentance, and petitioning God for atonement. Now, with sins forgiven, Jews usher in one of their most joyful holidays. Falling during the autumn, Sukkot is also a time to offer thanks for the harvest and to remember their forefathers' wandering in the desert for forty years.   
Jews commemorate the latter event by building sukkot, or small huts, that bring to mind the temporary dwellings the Israelites inhabited during their desert wanderings. Building these structures today — usually out of branches, leaves, and plywood — reminds the Jews of God's past provision and protection, and of how dependent we still are on Him for our every need. As Fellowship founder and president Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein writes in his book How Firm a Foundation, "By dwelling in an exposed, insecure hut, we are reminded that true security comes from being sheltered under God's protective wings."

So while Sukkot is a time of thanksgiving and joy, it's also a time of humility. Thus, it mirrors the true nature of thanksgiving — because anyone who utters the words "thank you" is expressing not only joy and happiness, but also an acknowledgment that these good things came from an outside source, from the one being thanked. As people of faith, we regularly offer our thanks as an act of obedience, in words of worship, and as a declaration of utter dependence on our God.

 From <<http://fellowship.ifcj.org/site/PageNavigator/eng/involved/Sukkot_thanksgiving.html>>

So genuine Thanksgiving cannot exist without a sense that are indebted to God for what we have. One of the original Pilgrim Fathers wrote to a friend in England about the first Thanksgiving dinner. It is from this original letter that we get a first-hand sense of the attitudes of those first New Englanders on the very first American Thanksgiving. The writer’s name was Edward Winslow.

“And God be praised, we had a good increase…. Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling that so we might after a special manner rejoice together….” Winslow continues, “These things I thought good to let you understand… that you might on our behalf give God thanks who hath dealt so favourably with us.”

What a testimony to the great beginning of Thanksgiving in America.

This tradition continues today. I always make a point to get a copy of the President’s annual Thanksgiving Proclamation. Here is this year’s Proclamation by President Trump.

BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

A PROCLAMATION

On Thanksgiving Day, as we have for nearly four centuries, Americans give thanks to Almighty God for our abundant blessings.  We gather with the people we love to show gratitude for our freedom, for our friends and families, and for the prosperous Nation we call home.

In July 1620, more than 100 Pilgrims boarded the Mayflower, fleeing religious persecution and seeking freedom and opportunity in a new and unfamiliar place.  These dauntless souls arrived in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in the freezing cold of December 1620.  They were greeted by sickness and severe weather, and quickly lost 46 of their fellow travelers.  Those who endured the incredible hardship of their first year in America, however, had many reasons for gratitude.  They had survived.  They were free.  And, with the help of the Wampanoag tribe, and a bountiful harvest, they were regaining their health and strength.  In thanks to God for these blessings, the new governor of the Plymouth Colony, William Bradford, proclaimed a day of thanksgiving and gathered with the Wampanoag tribe for three days of celebration.

For the next two centuries, many individual colonies and states, primarily in the Northeast, carried on the tradition of fall Thanksgiving festivities.  But each state celebrated it on a different day, and sometime on an occasional basis.  It was not until 1863 that the holiday was celebrated on one day, nationwide.  In the aftermath of the Battle of Gettysburg, of one of the bloodiest battles of our Nation's Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed that the country would set aside one day to remember its many blessings.  "In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity," President Lincoln proclaimed, we recall the "bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come."  As President Lincoln recognized: "No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things.  They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy."

Today, we continue to celebrate Thanksgiving with a grateful and charitable spirit.  When we open our hearts and extend our hands to those in need, we show humility for the bountiful gifts we have received.  In the aftermath of a succession of tragedies that have stunned and shocked our Nation -- Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria; the wildfires that ravaged the West; and, the horrific acts of violence and terror in Las Vegas, New York City, and Sutherland Springs -- we have witnessed the generous nature of the American people.  In the midst of heartache and turmoil, we are grateful for the swift action of the first responders, law enforcement personnel, military and medical professionals, volunteers, and everyday heroes who embodied our infinite capacity to extend compassion and humanity to our fellow man.  As we mourn these painful events, we are ever confident that the perseverance and optimism of the American people will prevail.

We can see, in the courageous Pilgrims who stood on Plymouth Rock in new land, the intrepidness that lies at the core of our American spirit.  Just as the Pilgrims did, today Americans stand strong, willing to fight for their families and their futures, to uphold our values, and to confront any challenge.

This Thanksgiving, in addition to rejoicing in precious time spent with loved ones, let us find ways to serve and encourage each other in both word and deed.  We also offer a special word of thanks for the brave men and women of our Armed Forces, many of whom must celebrate this holiday separated from the ones for whom they are most thankful.  As one people, we seek God's protection, guidance, and wisdom, as we stand humbled by the abundance of our great Nation and the blessings of freedom, family, and faith.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, DONALD J. TRUMP, President of the United States of America, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and the laws of the United States, do hereby proclaim Thursday, November 23, 2017, as a National Day of Thanksgiving.  I encourage all Americans to gather, in homes and places of worship, to offer a prayer of thanks to God for our many blessings.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this seventeenth day of November, in the year of our Lord two thousand seventeen, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and forty-second.

 DONALD J. TRUMP

Notice that our President included reference to both humility and generosity in his proclamation to us for Thanksgiving. Let’s talk about that second companion.

# Generosity to God and others

On the occasion of the people giving for the temple, David wrote;

"But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give **a**s generously as this?” 1 Chron 29:14 NIV

After reminding us all how God provides for us, Paul admonishes

“Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.” (1 Tim 6:18) NIV

I found this illustration of what I am talking about in an online sermon. It is about someone you have probably heard about.

Stephen King is the author of 49 suspense and horror novels that have sold over 350 million copies. Some of his novels have been made into blockbuster movies like The Shining, Fire Starter, and Shawshank Redemption. He's a raging Boston Red Sox fan, so the Red Sox always appear somewhere in his novels. Do you know he's a guitar player in a mediocre rock 'n roll band made up of other famous authors? You don't want to go on iTunes to get their music, believe me. Do you know that he's a recovering alcoholic? Do you know that he almost lost his life a few years ago? He was walking along a country road in Maine, and a van hit him and knocked him into a ditch. His legs were so crushed the doctors considered amputating them. But he managed to pull through. Did you know that he's an outspoken advocate of generosity? This caught my attention, and I couldn't believe it: *Stephen King, the horror novelist, advocates generosity?*

I came across it reading excerpts from a speech he gave to the graduates of Vassar College. It was a commencement address shortly after his accident and recovery. He said,

I found out what "you can't take it with you" means. I found out while I was lying in the ditch at the side of a country road covered with mud and blood and with the tibia of my right leg poking out the side of my jeans, like a branch of a tree taken down in a thunderstorm. I had a Master Card in my wallet, but when you're lying in a ditch with broken glass in your hair no one accepts Master Card. We all know that life is ephemeral, but on that particular day and in the months that followed, I got a painful but extremely valuable look at life's simple backstage truths.

We come in naked and broke. We may be dressed up when we go out, but we're just as broke. Warren Buffet is going to go out broke. Bill Gates is going out broke. Tom Hanks is going out broke. Steve King, broke, not a crying dime. All the money you earn, all the stocks you buy, all the mutual funds you trade, all of that is mostly smoke and mirrors. So I want you to consider making your life one long gift to others. And why not? All you have is on loan anyway. All that lasts is what you pass on. We have the power to help, the power to change. And why should we refuse? Because we're going to take it with us? Oh, please.

Right now we have the power to do great good for others. So I ask you to begin giving and to continue as you began. I think you'll find in the end that you got far more than you ever had and did more good than you ever dreamed.

From a sermon called Motivation for Generosity by Jim Nicodem. Copied from <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2012/december/motivation-for-generosity.html>

And this perspective of Stephen King’s is not even factoring in what Jesus said,

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Matt 6:19-21 NRSV

How do we store up treasure in heaven? Through generosity! As Paul admonished Timothy to teach those with this world’s goods;

Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life. 1 Tim 6:18-19 NIV

# Conclusion

So I ask you to be sure and make room at your Thanksgiving table for these two close friends of thanksgiving – humility before God and generosity to others. Seat them consciously in your heart right alongside Thanksgiving. In this way also your gratitude will become a wonderful expression of the two greatest commandments – “Love the Lord your God with all your heart” ... And, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”