

In Praise and Thanksgiving
Dt 8:7-18
by Gail Claus, Lay Associate Pastor
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Thursday is Thanksgiving Day. Hopefully this is a joyous time for you, and a holiday you are looking forward to with great anticipation.

Did you know that Thanksgiving is a unique holiday? It is a special day – a holiday – centered on a meal that also incorporates all Americans of all religions and ethnic backgrounds.

The idyllic tradition maintains that we have a feast with family and friends.

Does this sound familiar? Turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes and gravy, sweet potatoes, green beans, brussels sprouts, cranberry sauce, roasted chestnuts, jello salad... and after all have had their fill on the feast, watched a football game, taken a walk or napped, comes the anticipated star of the show, pumpkin pie with whipped cream. I'm sure most of us know some variation of this meal! Do you remember family gatherings for this special day?

My husband and I have a special Thanksgiving tradition that we do at some quiet point of the day. We reflect on our blessings in life. Both of us like quotes, so together we look at a book *The Thanksgiving Ceremony* by Edward Bleier and share the quotes that speak most to our hearts.

I asked a couple of people from our congregation to share their most memorable Thanksgiving. It turns out that they range from found happiness to real joys. Let me tell you their stories.

The first:

In an attempt to bring my fractured family together, I sent invitations to everyone inviting them to a Thanksgiving meal at my home. The list included my ex-husband, our three adult children, two sons, and a daughter, his daughter by a second marriage, my youngest son's wife, my oldest granddaughter and her husband, and the younger grandchildren; two males and two females.

At the time, not all of the members were speaking to each other. I suggested it was time to heal the wounds and come together for a celebratory meal. As I stated, "life is short, and this life is not a dress rehearsal."

My ex-husband sent an e-mail telling me "What a wonderful, thoughtful, gracious and kind idea to invite everyone. *However he would not be coming.*" His daughter also declined the invitation, but thanked me profusely for inviting her. My daughter called and said she would not come. My oldest son called and said he would come only if his dad did not come. My younger son, his wife, and my oldest

granddaughter and her husband accepted. On the day of the dinner, my oldest son called and said he was ill and could not come.

Five of us gathered for Thanksgiving: my youngest son and his wife, his daughter, and my granddaughter and her husband and I, sat down and enjoyed the meal. They had all brought food to share.

There was no sorrow for the missing family members. We appreciated each other and we were able to have a joyous celebration.

Now there is a family who knows how to find goodness in what could have been viewed as a failure.

I'm going to save the second story for later. However, there is a story from the Christian Science Monitor* that I would like to share. The cover this week was Giving Thanks, Giving Back. The article I am going to discuss is titled 'Gratitude.' In this article there is a quote Cicero:

"A thankful heart is not only the greatest virtue,
but the parent of all other virtues."

Doesn't this sound like the teachings we learn today? And Cicero was born over one hundred years before Jesus!

One more quote. This time from Charles Dickens, the renown English author.

"Reflect upon your present blessings – of which every man has many – not on your past misfortunes, of which all men have some."

Today, both secular and religious experts alike believe that gratitude may be the holy grail of personal and societal well-being. To us, we make the choice to live a life of gratitude. When we make this choice, we focus on what is good about our life, not things that are wrong.

Gratitude and thanksgiving are parallel concepts. Leonard Swidler, the editor of the Journal of Ecumenical Studies and religion professor at Temple University calls thankfulness "a spontaneous response of anyone with any sense at all that our existence as human beings is not pure accident. Thanksgiving is just a very central way of relating between believers and their ultimate reality – God."

Thanksgiving has an underlying theme of prosperity. How do all of these stories tie into the Biblical reading we heard today from Deuteronomy?

The Israelites were loved and chosen by God. They had received God's commandments at Mount Sinai, and they had just spent forty years wandering in the desert.

They are now standing at the border of Canaan, their promised land. They were the chosen people and God loved the Israelites and wanted them to experience a plentiful life. As we heard in Ron's reading of the Scripture, God gave them prosperity – a land filled with the life source of water, grains, fruits, olive trees and honey. And then there were the metals of copper and iron. God promised them they would lack nothing. This was a land of abundance!

Yet God was concerned. He was concerned that while they were given great abundance from Him, they might forget from where their abundance had come. He was concerned that they would forget gratitude. And a lack of gratitude would lead to wanting more and unhappiness with what had already been given. God wants the Israelites to keep that experience gratitude and thanks with what they had already have been given.

God wants no less for us. It can be a challenge, particularly at this time of the year when we are bombarded with a created need for more. Just look at all of the catalogs you receive with special offers such as a percentage discount or free shipping. And the TV ads. My goodness! Here we are in a state of high unemployment with cutbacks, and a significant number of jobs having gone overseas. The ads on TV are pushing diamond necklaces and bracelets. How insensitive to those unemployed and to those trying to find happiness with what they already have! What a statement of consumerism! Need more! Do not be satisfied with what you have.

Do you experience joy and gratitude for God's blessings? A lack of gratitude can lead to a life without blessing and joy. It can lead to greed for what you do not have. Sometimes it is difficult to look around you and not be jealous of what others have been given, especially if they have more, and lack gratitude and praise for God for what they have. But God wants you to be thankful always and see your life as a life of blessing and joy. The goal we face is to offer to God praise and thanksgiving. And it will lead to happiness. How do you handle your own prosperity?

I promised to save the other personal Thanksgiving story for later. This is one of pure joy. And it is going to tug at your heart.

My most memorable Thanksgiving was the year our youngest daughter was born. She was born on November 27, 1973 and she is a wonderful blessing. The nurses put her in an incubator but forgot to turn it on and she got very cold. They gave her to me when they discovered it and I held her – I think we bonded forever that day. She was born two days after Thanksgiving and our family ate out that year – a different kind of Thanksgiving but very memorable and cherished.

Does that story not tug at your heart? It is pure beauty in God's creation and love.

In closing, I would like to read a Psalm of Thanksgiving, the familiar Psalm 100. This is from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.

Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

Let us be thankful for that which we have and not discouraged over what we do not have.

May we all find gratitude in our hearts today and everyday for the blessings we have. Praise be to God and thanksgiving for his many blessings.

Amen