

Sermon, November 21, 2021

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

“Thanks Be to God”

George Washington was the first president to call for a day of thanksgiving, and then in the 19th century such a day was observed in various states, although at different times of the year. Then, in September 1863 a woman named Sarah Hale wrote to President Lincoln urging him to have the “day of our annual Thanksgiving made a National and fixed Union Festival”. Lincoln liked the idea and jumped right on it. And on October 3rd, just three months after the battle of Gettysburg, Lincoln proclaimed a National Day of Thanksgiving and Praise.

Despite the great carnage brought on by the Civil War, Lincoln saw growth and progress being made in the states, and in a lengthy proclamation he wrote, “I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens.. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners and sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation, and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility and Union.”

As I read Lincoln’s proclamation, I couldn’t help but notice how applicable it is for today. We are not now engaged in a brutal civil war, but we have for the last year and more been a nation battling with a deadly pandemic - and right now it is somewhat coincidental that the number of people who have died from Covid is very close to the number who died in the Civil War. The virus, of course has left in its wake, widows, orphans, mourners, and sufferers, and we are indeed a nation very much in need of healing.

At first, it seems a bit odd to be offering thanksgivings at a time of so much suffering, but, certainly, not without precedent. When the Pilgrims gathered for what we call the First Thanksgiving it took place after a devastating few month in which half their population had died. Cold, hunger, and disease had taken a devastating toll. But they were not the only ones who took part in the feast, and the Pilgrims were not the only ones who had suffered greatly. The tribe whom the Pilgrims had the most immediate contact were the Pokanokets, led by their sachem, Massasoit. The tribe had recently contracted an epidemic of their own, brought on by diseases carried over by Europeans for which they had no immunity. Thousands of Natives had died, and the survival of the Pokanoket tribe hung by a thread.

Yet all of them gathered together. It probably took place sometime in late September or October, a time when there was still some warmth in the air and when the New England foliage was at its peak with its brilliant reds, yellows, and oranges. The Pilgrims that had survived that first year had killed ducks, geese, and wild turkeys, and gathered clams, lobsters, and fish. Massasoit showed up with over a hundred members of his tribe, bringing five recently killed deer.

It certainly was a feast to remember! And although their respective spiritual beliefs were quite different, I’m sure they each, in their own way, expressed their gratitude, not only for the

bounteous feast, but for whatever blessings they felt God had supplied. And, as Lincoln expressed in his proclamation, they, no doubt, also saw it as a time to remember those they had lost, and those who still struggled for survival.

This morning's reading ends with the words, "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" What is that gift? Well, in that Paul says that it is indescribable it would be a little arrogant for me to say it is this or that, but we can speculate. First, we may consider that it is the grace of God, mentioned in the previous sentence, knowing that elsewhere in Paul's writing it is described as a gift. It is the gift of *agape*, *that is*, God's unconditional love - that we are accepted by God just as we are, without any need of having to prove our worthiness.

It may also be God's generosity, considering all the many blessings that are ours in this life - blessings such as friends and family - those who enrich our lives with their care and support, and, above all, their love. For us there is also the blessed gift of the church - a community of people with a common faith, gathered together in fellowship, and sent into the world to bear witness to God's grace through service to those in need. Of course, there is also the gift of a Son - a Son by the name of Jesus, with the title of Christ - the Anointed One. In him we come to see what it means to be fully human and embody a life of compassion, to be merciful and forgiving, and to strive for justice and peace.

So many gifts, so many blessings!

In recent weeks I have shared with you, bits, and pieces of the works of some of my favorite writers - Hawthorne, Poe, Melville, Hemingway. But going all the way back to my teenage years, until now, I have to say my favorite writer has been, and will probably always be, Tennessee Williams. And there is a particular quote of his that has always stuck with me. He wrote, "Once you fully apprehend the vacuity of a life without struggle you are equipped with the basic means of salvation". This takes us back to the issue of thanksgiving in times of trial and tribulation, such as those faced by Lincoln, the Pilgrims, and the Pokanokets. There are those times when we are faced with challenges, adversity, tragedy, and that those times are not always pleasant. But Williams is pointing to the fact that there would be a certain emptiness in our lives without those experiences. Through them we grow as Christians and as human beings, when we choose to learn from them, and place them in their proper context. And we can rejoice in knowing that when we cling to our faith, that God, in His remarkable grace, will help to see us through!

And, so, as you sit down to partake of a Thanksgiving feast this week, take a moment to reflect upon the many gifts of God, and express gratitude for His presence in your life! Amen.

Let us pray: O God, giver of all good, who continually pours your benefits upon us, again after the living wait upon you and find that of your faithfulness there is no end and that your care is unfailing. We praise you that the mystery of our life is a mystery of infinite goodness. We praise you for the order and constancy of nature, for the beauty and bounty of the earth, for day and night, summer and winter, seedtime and harvest. We give you thanks for all the comforts and joy of life, for our friends and family, and for all the love and sympathy and goodwill of all people. Amen.