

## Called as Partners in Christ's Service: Thanks Giving

Mark 12:28-34

Georgetown Presbyterian Church

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This week I imagine that most of us will eat more than we should. To make matters worse, it's only the beginning of a whole month in which most of us will end up eating more than we should. And so I wanted to share a couple of tidbits about food I came across this past week.

Andy Rooney has noted that the two biggest sellers in any bookstore are the cookbooks and the diet books. The cookbooks tell you how to prepare the food, and the diet books tell you how not to eat any of it.

Orson Welles once said, "My doctor has advised me to give up those intimate little dinners for four, unless, of course, there are three other people eating with me."

A California scientist has computed that the average human being eats 16 times his or her own weight in an average year, while a horse eats only eight times its weight. This all seems to prove that if you want to lose weight, you should eat like a horse!

Yes, indeed—Thanksgiving is upon us. Isn't it interesting that our annual stewardship emphasis always culminates around the time of Thanksgiving? I'm not sure how intentional that is, since stewardship is typically thought of as the prelude to our budget preparations, and we need to conclude our pledging drives in time to prepare our budget for the new year. Here at Georgetown Presbyterian, we've tweaked our process somewhat in that we now no longer depend on knowing how much you have pledged; we now blend a responsible fiscal restraint with faithful discernment of the work God is calling us to do, and we trust that the pieces will fall into place during the course of the year.

But even if the timing between stewardship and Thanksgiving is not totally intentional, still I believe that there is an undeniably strong relationship between stewardship and thankfulness. For whether we are describing giving in terms of money or time or skills and talents, the truth is giving is greater, giving is better, giving is more infectious when the giving is born of a spirit of gratitude.

Thanksgiving is one of the most basic responses found throughout scripture. Praise and thanksgiving form the foundation on which we are to live our lives. The first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks about the chief end, the fundamental purpose of our lives. And the answer, as every good Presbyterian knows, is that our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.

And that begins and ends with gratitude. Gratitude comes from the recognition of what God has done for us, and gratitude moves us to draw even closer to God. Gratitude comes from the recognition of God's generosity toward us through blessings without number, and gratitude is what spurs us to generosity in return.

There are some who would look at our world today and wonder why we should be thankful. We look around us and see a struggling economy, and an embattled congress, and prolonged wars on two fronts, and the growing cynicism concerning human goodness, and we're tempted to wonder, "Why be thankful in a world such as ours?"

But the truth is, our national celebration of Thanksgiving did not arise during a period of prosperity; rather, our celebration of Thanksgiving was born in times of adversity and hardship. Thanksgiving celebrations are modeled after the first recognized Thanksgiving observation, that of the pilgrims. However, that Thanksgiving was celebrated after a horrific first year in the New Country, a year in which over half of the original settlers died. During a time of extreme adversity, they paused to give thanks.

Abraham Lincoln declared the first true national autumn Thanksgiving for Thursday, November 26, 1863, recognizing a long-standing New England tradition of placing the holiday on the fourth Thursday in November. He did it partially to help soothe the national mood, which was weary of the Civil War. He declared Thanksgiving again for November 23, 1864. During a time of severe adversity and national crisis, Lincoln thought it important to pause and give thanks.

In 1941, Congress passed a bill, and FDR signed it, that fixed the date as the fourth Thursday in November. On November 26, 1941, FDR signed the bill. While Congress and FDR were putting the official stamp on this holiday, the world was at war; just days after FDR signed the bill, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, thus pulling our nation into the war.

My point is this: It has been during times of extreme adversity that our forefathers thought it most important to give thanks. Maybe that's because they recognized that it is in the midst of the perishing of worldly goods that we are best able to recognize the things that are most important. Maybe it's in the midst of diminishing material well-being that we are best able to discern God's faithfulness and love.

Stewardship is far more effective when it begins with thanksgiving. Some see stewardship only as an obligation. But if that's the only way you see stewardship, then you'll just end up serving and giving grudgingly. Where's the love and generosity in that? What kind of stewardship is it when you only give your time and your money because you have to? How much greater it is when stewardship is informed by a grateful heart because, you see, thanksgiving is infectious and spreads to others, and thanksgiving also issues in generosity.

Patrick Miller notes how thanksgiving and praise "by their very nature reach out, draw in, encompass, and involve others. Thanksgiving is not private. It arises out of relationship and further enhances and strengthens it. I would dare say that there are few human acts that serve more to deepen relationships than the expression of thanks."<sup>1</sup> Our theme for stewardship this year is "Called as Partners in Christ's Service." And the truth is there are few things that can foster a strong partnership in our ministry of the gospel more effectively than a spirit of thanksgiving. There are few things that can create a mutual commitment to one another and to God than a spirit of thanksgiving. What better way can you think of to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves, than to let it all arise out of a spirit of gratitude?

Gratitude is infectious, contagious. It is something that we simply cannot keep to ourselves. Throughout the Bible, gratitude wells up within the people of God, and it becomes like ripples in a pond, ever spreading outward. In the Bible, praise in the people of God spills over and begins a chain reaction of praise and thanksgiving that leads to the whole world praising God. If you want stewardship that grows and multiplies, you need to start with a grateful heart.

Rev. John Ramsey tells how in one church a certain person provided him with a rose boutonniere for the lapel of his suit every Sunday. At first he really appreciated it but then it sort of became routine. Then one Sunday the rose took on a very special meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick D. Miller, Jr., "In Praise and Thanksgiving," *Theology Today*, July 1988, p. 185.

As he was leaving the Sunday Service a young boy walked up to him and said, “Sir, what are you going to do with your flower?” Ramsey pointed to the rose on his lapel and asked the boy, “Do you mean this?”

The boy said, “Yes, sir. If you're just going to throw it away, I would like it.”

The preacher smiled and told him he could have the flower and then casually asked what he was going to do with it. The boy, who was probably no more than 10 years old, looked up at the preacher and said, “Sir, I'm going to give it to my granny. My mother and father divorced last year. I was living with my mother, but she married again, and wanted me to live with my father. I lived with him for a while, but he said I couldn't stay, so he sent me to live with my grandmother. She is so good to me. She cooks for me and takes care of me. She has been so good to me that I wanted to give her that pretty flower for loving me.”

When the little boy finished, the preacher could hardly speak. His eyes filled with tears and he knew he had been touched by God. He reached up and unpinned the rose. With the flower in his hand, he looked at the boy and said, “Son, that is the nicest thing that I've ever heard but you can't have this flower because it's not enough. If you'll look in front of the pulpit, you'll see a big bouquet of flowers. Different families buy them for the Church each week. Please take those flowers to your granny because she deserves the very best.”

The little boy wanted to give because he was grateful for the love and care of his grandmother. It was thankfulness that informed his desire to give.

What is it that motivates your giving? Like that boy's granny, God has blessed us so much. God has been so good to us that giving shouldn't even be a question. It should just flow from us naturally.

This morning as you bring forth your stewardship covenants, does your covenant reflect your love of God and your gratitude for God's blessings? Is your giving, whether it is in terms of money or time or talents—is your giving a measure of your thanks?