



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“WHAT’S ON YOUR CALENDAR TODAY?”

Scripture Lessons: Habakkuk 3:17-19; I Thessalonians 5: 12-24

This meditation was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, November 23, 2008 at the 11:15 a.m. service.

What is this Sunday called on the calendar you keep? Is it something more than merely the 23rd day of November 2008? The truth is that we keep and recognize different calendars. For many Americans this is the Sunday before Thanksgiving Day and kicks off a shortened work week featuring gatherings with family and friends around tables laden with God’s bounty. It is for them a time to reflect on the blessings we enjoy in this land as individuals and as a society.

For some this is primarily Stewardship Commitment Sunday and all of our members are asked to submit their pledges toward the work of the church in the coming year. Some of us know very well that only through the generosity of some and the participation of many more than previously have given in the past will we be able to accomplish the work God has given us to do in the year before us. This day enables each of us to decide if our giving to the Lord is a priority in our lives or whether it is simply a token gift from our discretionary income.

For still others this is Communion Sunday when we come together around the table of our Lord and celebrate the Eucharist together.

For others this is Christ the King Sunday, the final Sunday on the calendar of the liturgical year with next Sunday being the first Sunday of Advent and the beginning of a brand new liturgical cycle.

There may well be other events going on this Sunday in you own life, events of which I am totally unaware but events that are prominent in you personal calendars for this day.

As I reflected earlier this week on all of these calendar concerns for this special Sunday, there seemed to me to be an overriding theme connecting all of these disjointed events. Whether we are focusing on Stewardship Commitment, on the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday, or the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, or even Christ the King Sunday on the Liturgical calendar, the topic of Thanksgiving is both appropriate and pertinent.

Stewardship, of course, revolves around the twin themes of gratitude and responsibility. If a person recognizes that all of his or her blessings in life are gifts from God; and if that person also accepts the Biblical principal that God will hold us accountable for the use we have made of the gifts entrusted to us --- then supporting the work of Christ’s church is not some grim duty but rather a joyful privileged. And apart form a genuine sense of gratitude to God stewardship can neither be practiced nor understood. The fact that a majority of members gave no financial support to the church in the calendar year of 2007 indicates to me that there is either a lack of recognition of the sources of our blessings or else a refusal to be held accountable. But the road to generosity and faithful stewardship travels down a path of true and profound gratitude to God.

And of course Thanksgiving to God is also an essential element in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. In many churches the preferred name for this sacrament the Eucharist, a word which literally means "thanksgiving". Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me." If a recalling of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ does not inspire a welling up of thanksgiving within our souls, then we have no comprehension of the cost of our redemption and this communion in which we participate is in no sense holy. It is simply a necessary but regrettable extension of the worship service, requiring some ten to fifteen minutes of our precious time but leaving us no more grateful than we would be should juice and cookies be served after worship. And so, if we do not come to this table with an abiding sense of thanksgiving to God for our unmerited redemption, then we would probably be better advised no to come at all.

And as for Christ the King Sunday, the climax of the Christian year, does not this day celebrate that the Messiah we began to anticipate last Advent, who was born at Christmas, crucified during Lent, raised on Easter morning, and who sent the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and who is coming again and is now our risen and reigning Lord who claims the ultimate allegiance of our lives. Whether or not Christ is King in actuality for you and me depends on whether or not he has been given supreme loyalty in our lives, whether his will trumps our will, whether his values supersede our values. In short, if Jesus Christ has earned the right to reign over us as Lord and King, if we have surrendered ourselves to him then there is profound thanksgiving which expresses itself in our living, in our giving and in our serving.

And finally, for nearly all of us here this morning as we entered the sanctuary we were probably conscious of the fact that this is the last Sunday before our national holiday known as Thanksgiving. No doubt we felt moved to voice our gratitude to God on this day or perhaps to seek an extra measure of God's grace to shore up for the hordes of relatives who will be descending upon us mid-week, or upon whom we will be descending. In truth, we may not have known or else had forgotten all about Stewardship Commitment Sunday. And neither did we know or care that this was Christ the King Sunday on the liturgical calendar or either Communion Sunday on the church calendar. Those things may have caught us off guard or unawares but Thanksgiving --- Thanksgiving we can understand, remember and appreciate. We get thanksgiving, do we not? But do we get thanksgiving as a child of God and a follower of Jesus Christ? Perhaps not, so let me explain.

Some years ago I read an article by George Fowler, a Trappist monk from Nashville Tennessee, he said that Thanksgiving has become the "religious holiday for heretics." What he meant by that is that Thanksgiving has become a day and a season in which the nonreligious, the non-believing, the non-church going, the non-synagogue going people can celebrate. Because this national holiday is largely free of theological dogma, liturgical trappings and religious ritual, it serves as a kind of high, holy day for the vast number of Americans who say they believe in God but actually have nothing to do with organized religion. There is some truth in that. Nearly every person, religious or not, wants to express a feeling of gratitude that wells up inside when there are blessings in abundance, blessings that we so take for granted. And thus, with its sacraments of food, family, football and fun, Thanksgiving Day serves as a kind of religious holiday for secular people. It may well be as close as some folk ever come during the course of the year to doing something remotely religious --- and that is acknowledging the debt they owe to some benevolent being for the blessings and benefits of life.

Again, I think Fowler makes a good point and I don't have a problem with his view of Thanksgiving as far as it goes. In fact, I prefer this view of Thanksgiving to the one espoused by the National Education Association which would reduce Thanksgiving to a national celebration of cultural diversity. At least God remains in the picture as the object of our thanks and as the Giver of the blessings we enjoy as a nation and as individuals. If the NEA had its way, there would be no

Thanksgiving to God but merely the recognition and celebration of cross cultural ties and the dependence of European religious settlers on the indigenous Native American peoples. You see in the NEA account of Thanksgiving God is removed from the equation.

Now if Thanksgiving Day does nothing more than enable secular people to voice their gratitude for the blessings of life, then it serves a useful purpose. This kind of elementary, even superficial gratitude is simply a matter of common courtesy and good manners. Saying thank you for kindnesses done and gifts received is appropriate whether you are in junior high school or in junior league and it is a gesture that is in all too short supply in contemporary life. Many people have a sense of entitlement about the blessings of life so it is good for people to recognize them as gifts from above.

So gratitude for gifts received is appropriate for all people, whether they are particularly religious or not. But for religious people it is especially appropriate that we should be thankful. Gratitude is one of dominate themes of the Psalms and over and over again the psalmist commends an expression of Thanksgiving for God's blessings. We were called to worship this morning with the words of the 103 Psalm: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all of his benefits." Other Psalms say: "I will sing to the Lord because he has dealt bountifully with me." (Psalm 13:6) "O give thanks to the Lord, for He is God; for his steadfast love endures forever!" (Psalm 107:1) "Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for His wonderful works to humankind." (Psalm 107:8)

And yet, as important as this kind of gratitude is for the religious and the nonreligious alike, there remains a deeper dimension to gratitude for people of faith, a dimension that would be utterly foreign to the secular person and to the nonreligious. This aspect of a believer's Thanksgiving would seem strange if not nonsensical to those for whom scripture is neither normative nor authoritative. And this deeper dimension of Thanksgiving is verbalized throughout the Bible. In my estimation, the Biblical text that best expresses it is found in a beautiful and evocative passage from the prophetic book of Habakkuk, chapter 3, verses 17& 18:

**"Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exalt in the God of my salvation."**

A passage like that is incomprehensible to a secular or a nonreligious person. This kind of gratitude goes against the grain for it is a gratitude that can be felt and expressed even in the worst of times and situations. It is a gratitude that recognizes that there is a loving, benevolent and powerful God, behind all the events of life . . . and thus God is capable of using even our heartaches and tragedies to bless his people and what a difference this kind of thanksgiving makes, especially in seasons such as we know today when the economy is in trouble, when war is at hand, when jobs have been lost, when financial prospects are grim. As people of faith we dare to believe that our God is still at work and though we cannot see what God is about to accomplish and days dark and dismal we dare to believe that God will yet bless us.

Later the apostle Paul will write to the Thessalonians encouraging them to rejoice always, to pray without ceasing and to give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God. Notice if you will that Paul does not say to give thanks for all circumstances but rather in all circumstances.

To be able to express our gratitude to God even when the fig trees do not blossom, when fruit is not on the vine, when the fields yield no harvest and the flock is cut off from the fold --- this kind of

gratitude is born of a conviction unseen and perhaps even unrealized at the moment, that God will work through all circumstances for the good of those who love and serve him. This kind of tough, discipline gratitude finds a way to thank God in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, in sunshine and in shadow, realizing that the Lord can take the worst events of life and transform them by his grace into blessings for us and others. God can take the tangled threads and loose ends of our lives and miraculously weave them into a beautiful tapestry beyond all our imagining.

You see, anyone can thank God and indeed they should when blessings abound and life is brimming over with health and happiness and prosperity. But children of God and disciples of Jesus Christ can express thanksgiving and feel a sense of gratitude as a radical act of faith even in dark and difficult days.

When Abraham Lincoln issued the first general Presidential Thanksgiving Proclamation urging the nation to express its gratitude to God, some must have thought him insane. It was, after all, October 3, 1863 and the nation was torn asunder by The War Between the States.

When Martin Rinkart penned some immortal lines about gratitude back in the 1600's, he was not writing in a season of abundance and prosperity and peace. Rather, he was writing in a time famine, pestilence, death and destruction during the Thirty Year's War in Europe. You see, Pastor Rinkart was the only pastor in the walled city of Eilenburg in Saxony. Many people in the city had died as casualties of the war and as victims of starvation and illness. During the great pestilence of 1637, Rinkart conducted 4,500 funerals, sometimes as many as 40 or 50 in a day and these included the funerals of his own wife and children. But Martin Rinkhart's sturdy Lutheran faith is reflected in the words he wrote out of that experience that form the lyrics for the hymn we will close with this morning and reveal that even in the worst of times people of faith can do the best of things. We can discover and express our genuine and heartfelt gratitude to God. The words Rinkart wrote are these:

**Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices,
who wondrous things hath done, in whom his world rejoices;
who, from our mothers' arms, hath blessed us on our way
with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.**

Prayer: Because of your blessings seen and unseen, O God, because of your love and power and providential care which can transform curse into blessing, sorrow into joy, and struggle into triumph give us the grace not only in this week or on this Sunday, but through out the course of lives, to express our great and glad thanksgiving to you, our God. Amen.