

# Sermon for Thanksgiving

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Killeen, Texas

November 18, 2018

Let's talk about Thanksgiving now, where the very act of being thankful, in and of itself, heals our souls.

That statement might stealth in under your radar, but it's really pretty shocking. Thankfulness heals our souls. Some years ago, I attended a conference that made a great impression on me when I listened to a straight-faced shrink tell us, for a solid hour, that an attitude of thankfulness changes the way we experience the entire world. This ain't warm 'n' fuzzy churchy stuff. It's hard science.

How sad that we normally scale thanks down to the proportion of what we're giving thanks for. If somebody gives you a stick of chewing gum, you nod with a quick grin. When a co-worker covers for you, you express your gratitude in a heartfelt way and make sure you return the favor. If Oprah gives you a new car, it's considered appropriate to hold your head with both hands and scream incoherently at the top of your lungs while your eyes bug out and your relatives back home start making excuses for you.

So thanksgiving, in *our* experience, is something like a business transaction. You wouldn't think of overpaying, so you wouldn't think of over thanking either. What a pity.

Thanksgiving is so much more. Being thankful is such a major act that, as I said, it can heal your soul. That makes it bigger than sticks of chewing gum or favors at work or even cars.

For thanksgiving is not scaled merely to the things that bless our bodies; it is scaled up by the things that *damage* our souls. Thanksgiving is greater than fear, anxiety or pain. Bigger, than any of the things that box in our spirits, shut down our hearts, harm our souls. Thanksgiving is bigger than the most evil things that can be done to us.

How big is Thanksgiving?

Well, the word "eucharist" might seem kind of quaint and churchy to you. It's one of those odd, Greek words that makes us sound like we're smarter than we really are. The truth is that "eucharist" was a pretty ordinary word in ancient Greek. It just meant "thanks."

So when we Christians call it "Eucharist," we're saying that thanksgiving is our bond with Jesus at the moment he gives his life to save the world. That's the size of thanksgiving.

For in God's mind, thanksgiving is the instrument specifically designed to heal what's wrong in human nature. What's wrong in human nature, exactly? Well, what do you worry about? What do you fear? What makes you resentful? What are those things? They're the things that make us feel small, think small and act small. Things that make us feel ungodly.

What's wrong with human nature is the way we let the things that we fear, hate and resent carve great chunks out of our good nature and throw them into the trash. When we feel small in the face of challenges, we *are* small. The more we let our failures and our fear of failure run our lives, the more these terrible things take control, limiting and binding our actions, dictating who we are. And let me tell you, these are small, mean-minded little gods. They do not love you.

How do we defeat them and get our human nature back? People, we've gotta get big again. I'll let you in on a secret. The opposite of fear is not courage. The opposite of fear is gratitude. When we're terribly afraid, God does not expect us to be Batman or John Wayne. Rather, God hopes that we will catch the spirit of Mother Teresa or Gandhi. Why else would Jesus tell us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us? I guarantee Batman and the Duke don't love their enemies and pray for them. That's Mother Teresa's thing.

Thanksgiving, therefore, looks at all the same things that fear, anxiety and resentment see, but looks through the eyes of a great *soul* rather than the eyes of a damaged and small *mind*. To the great soul, everything in this world is an opportunity to find your way to the creator. Without thanks in your heart, you cannot be open to love and prayer when you meet your so-called enemies. Your mind will be too busy thinking of small and mean defense strategies.

All that brings to mind a famous story of just such a great-souled person. It's a story told by Corrie ten Boom in her chronicle of life in Ravensbruck, a singularly nasty Nazi concentration camp. She and others were jammed together in a horribly uncomfortable wooden shack of a building that was full of fleas. I don't know if you've ever experienced a real flea infestation, but I have. Carpeting and upholstery are alive with an electric buzz, even wooden floors, and that electric buzz has lots and lots of teeth.

People in this building were angry and resentful. They hated the relentless assault by the fleas. They hated each other. They hated the Nazis. Most of all, they hated God.

Who could blame them? Hate was the only satisfying feeling they could muster.

Corrie knew hatred would only make them smaller and smaller human beings. By the time the Nazis finally got around to killing them, her people would be dead already – psychologically and spiritually dead. So she went to work on them. *No*, she insisted, we must give thanks "at all times and places." The fleas are what we have. We must give *thanks* for the fleas. We have to thank *God* for the fleas.

They thought she was crazy and they hated her, too. At first. In the end her enthusiasm was brighter than the darkness and so a very few of them began to give thanks in that evil place. They tried – finding the words hard to speak at first – to give thanks for the fleas.

And then the truth dawned on them. Corrie hadn't known this truth in advance. All she knew was to give thanks. But the truth, once it hit them, spread throughout the entire building like a blinding flash of light and brought them to their knees thanking the God they had lost in their hatred but found again. For they saw that the prison

guards, the brutal, sadistic perverts who routinely beat and tortured people, hated the fleas too. The guards *never* came into this particular building to brutalize them. The fleas were a God-given gift protecting these people from their real oppressors. In the end, the fleas saved their very lives, and thanksgiving healed their souls.

So here we are, you and I. Thanksgiving 2018. In the face of all that afflicts us in the world, do we dare to think that Thanksgiving 2018 might be just the right time to begin the renewal and healing of our souls and those around us by standing up, like Corrie ten Boom, and calling for thanksgiving? It is absolutely true, as Jesus said, that the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. We are surrounded on every side by a vast field of souls full of fear, anxiety and pain who are just one step away from the Kingdom of God if only someone will come to turn them around on their fleas.

It seems like a tall order, maybe even impossible. How can we do it? Our human instinct is to resent God for asking such a thing of us. But then, there it is right there. We need to begin our work as Jesus' laborers with gratitude in our hearts that the opportunity exists. For when we are grateful to God for the opportunity to embody goodness right down to our toes, then our mission is defined by the greatness of God and not by our fear of embarrassment or failure.

If our challenge right here and right now seems great, it only mirrors our place in the great scheme of things. In the big picture of God's plan for salvation, there have always been few laborers in the harvest. Yet such is the task that grateful Christians have always embraced.

So thank God for Jesus. And thank God for our call to be like Jesus.

And thank God for the fleas.

*The Rev. David Hoster*