"The Transforming Power of a Grateful Heart"


Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

November 23, 2008

Christ the King/Thanksgiving Sunday

The modern world is a noisy place. The noise complicates life and it tends to empty the human soul. The noise is difficult to escape. Noise greets us at the office, bombards us on the streets, surrounds us in stores; noise invades our homes.

We long for quiet, but it’s not easy to find. Some folks, however, don’t want to escape the noise. Then they’d be alone with themselves.

Much of the noise is a deluge of words. Radio and television hurl words at us. Cell phones follow us filled with words. PDAs interrupt life with more words. A plethora of words is delivered to our doorsteps, mailboxes and answering machines. Fax machines chatter with more words. We sit at word processors giving and receiving words. Television is glutted with commercials that overwhelm us with noisy words.

Departments in businesses exist to file words away for safekeeping. Political campaigns are blizzards of words, often empty words, just jargon that finally numbs understanding – perhaps that’s the point.

But Thanksgiving is different. It’s a quiet day. The streets are empty, offices too. Stores are closed, and airports are eerily quiet. I once flew from Boston to Minneapolis on Thanksgiving morning. Downtown Boston was empty. The ordinary glut of traffic disappeared. Just a few of us entered the nearly empty terminal to board flights with more empty seats than full. Most of us slept. The flight attendants had little to do.

About the only noise on Thanksgiving is conversation, often quiet conversation, among family members and friends gathered for the feast. The TV is off – or a football game flickers in the background, sound off. Around the table we talk, laugh, and enjoy one another and the bounty of a good land.

The crises of life, work and nation are shoved to the background for a day – or a weekend. Our busy, complicated lives slow down for a brief respite giving us time and space to measure our worth and count our blessings by a different standard. Around the table, surrounded by people whom we love and who love us, we take time to cherish one another. And we long for more times like Thanksgiving.

On Thanksgiving all of life is reduced to two simple and transforming words: thank you. And if we pay attention to those words come Thursday, at the end of the day we will be better women, men and children. If you are at all concerned with your spiritual formation, Thanksgiving is for you. It is foundational to true spirituality.

Simply put, gratitude changes things – and us in the process. Those two little words, thank you, bear enormous power. Most importantly, gratitude changes us.
The most basic, foundational messages are usually simply said. Or, to put it another way, they are simply profound. You might remember the famous advertisement placed in the Wall Street Journal by United Technologies a few years ago. It was titled, “Keep it Simple.”

Strike three.
Get your hand off my knee.
You’re overdrawn.
Your horse won.
You have the account.
Yes.
No.
Walk.
Don’t walk.
Mother’s dead.

Basic events require simple language.


When I was in my mid 20s, I sat down the week of Thanksgiving and made a list of people for whom I was thankful. As I thought about it, my mother went to the top of the list. I decided to write her a note of thanksgiving. I thanked her for sacrificing her body for my birth. I thanked her for the thousands of meals prepared with love, for all the homework she helped me finish, for loving me unconditionally every day of my life, for being on my side, and pushing me to excel. The list went on.

That exercise gave me new eyes and a larger heart. Years later, mom told me that little note made one of the best days of her life. Gratitude changes things, especially us.

Ben Stein is an economist and a comedian. Several years ago he wrote a piece in the New York Times about his father, also a well-known economist. He told how his father worked his way through Williams College in the 1930s. His job was washing dishes in the basement of a fraternity house. The fraternity didn’t allow Jewish members at the time, and son Ben imagines his Jewish father toiling in the basement for young men of privilege upstairs who wouldn’t accept him.

Ben says a few years ago he asked his father if he carried any anger or resentment from that humiliating experience.

“Not at all,” he said. “I didn’t have the luxury of feeling aggrieved. I was just grateful to have a job so I could go to one of the best schools in the country.”

Son Ben comments, “I think this was the secret ingredient...in my father’s success and happiness. He did not feel he had the luxury of feeling aggrieved. He was just grateful for the opportunities he had been given” (NYT, 6/5/05).

Gratitude creates a transformative vision of life that changes the shape of the heart and opens doors of opportunity otherwise shut.

I want you to imagine another face. Walther is an immigrant. He and his wife, Johanna, were teenagers in Copenhagen during the Nazi occupation. They often talked about searching for food all day to feed their families and finding only a potato or a cup of flour or nothing.

Whenever we visited them they served us some treat if not a meal. Before we ate, even if it was only cookies and coffee, Walther bowed his head and thanked God for the food. Often his voice would break with emotion, and he never ever prayed before food that he
didn’t ask God to be with those who don’t have enough to eat. He would lift his head, eyes shining with tears and near beatific smile of gratitude.

Gratitude offers an alternative vision of life and reshapes the heart in wonderful ways.

Among other things, gratitude, which is a child of love, has its own natural offspring – generosity.

That’s why St. Paul in the Epistle Lesson writes, “Those who sow generously reap generously. God loves a cheerful giver. As a consequence of a grateful and generous heart, God will provide every blessing.”

Gratitude works! But gratitude is much more than a pragmatic tool for a better you and a better life. Scripture teaches and the church has always believed that we are created to be grateful.

Several weeks ago, we called our four-year-old granddaughter on her birthday. We happened to call at the very moment she was opening the gift we gave her – a Barbie doll that is a mermaid, if you can believe it. Our son answered the phone. We heard shrieks of joy in the background. David told Regan it was us on the phone. She came running to the phone and with joyous excitement said, “Oh thank you. This is the best present I ever got in my whole life. I love you. Bye.”

Her gratitude was natural, spontaneous, and utterly genuine. Her large and innocent heart filled with love doesn’t know better. Soon enough her natural gratitude will be paved over with self-interested calculation, reluctance to bare her heart, studied adolescent indifference, and likely a sense of entitlement.

Then she will fall in love and discover herself all over again. Swelling love will burst out in gratitude for smallest things and her face will light up with spontaneous delight. Sadly, like all of us, the weight of years will likely make delighted gratitude less and less ordinary.

David Buttrick tells of a baby who claps her hands at most everything. Put breakfast cereal in front of her, and baby breaks into a handclap. Set her down in the middle of her toys, and she breaks out in applause. She sees her mother’s face and claps her hands. Her parents take her to the seashore and she gives an ovation to the waves rushing in.

Someone asks the parents if they are concerned about this strange habit. “We only worry,” they reply, “that someday she’ll stop.”

St. Paul, in another place, argues that the devolution of humanity into sin and corruption began with a failure to be thankful. Without gratitude, our hearts twist out of proper shape and little good follows. Lack of gratitude is a deep failure of the soul.

But deep inside us we know better. Our better angels, obeying that deep instinct, create rituals of thanksgiving. Every culture has them. Every religion features gratitude and rituals of thanksgiving.

The central act of Christian worship is thanksgiving. Weekly, we gather to thank God for our creation, our preservation, and all the blessing of life. The ritual of confession and absolution is a matter of thanksgiving. “Hear the good news,” the minister says. God forgives us not because we deserve forgiving. God forgives simply because he forgives. We sing hymns of gratitude for God’s unfailing love. God loves us not because we’ve earned God’s love. God loves us unconditionally and irrevocably because God loves folks like us.

Christian worship has always placed the communion table at the center of our life together. Early on, the Christian movement called this table the “Eucharist,” Greek for “thanksgiving.” The Eucharist is a ritual meal that remembers God’s love for us, and
reenacts the great act of God’s salvation, Christ’s death, burial and resurrection. And we say, “Thank you, God.”

Here we are, gathered once again to clap hands and say, “Thank you, God.” Each Sunday we recover that basic human instinct so easily buried under the noise, confusion, and complications of our busy lives. There’s plenty to clap about. Look up and see the generosity of a gracious God who created us in love, who in the middle of time sent Jesus Christ to invite all us lost children to come home to God. See a God who walks with us all the journey, because God delights in our company. Thank you, God.

Look around. There’s plenty to clap about in this room. This is our spiritual home, and these are our brothers and sisters in faith. All of us are in covenant with us, bound together with cords of love. Some have walked through deep waters with us. Some are our dearest friends. Thank you, God.

Thursday we will join America in our national ritual of Thanksgiving. There’s plenty to clap about even in these dark days. We are a blessed people, a good land, a remarkable people. All of us are children of this nation’s vast opportunity.

Even in the darkest times thanksgiving is transforming and necessary. In a moment we will sing a traditional Thanksgiving hymn, “Now Thank We All Our God.” The hymn was written by a German pastor in the early 17th century in the midst of the Thirty Years’ War. Martin Rinkart was a pastor in the walled city of Eilenberg in Saxony.

Thousand of refugees fled the ravages of war to find safety behind the walls of the city.

The Swedish army besieged the city. No one and nothing entered or left the city gates. Inside the walls, the situation was constant desperation. Famine, plague and fear ravaged the population. People died at an alarming rate. Rinkart himself conducted 4,000 funerals in one year. At the beginning of the siege, eight pastors served the village. At the end, Rinkart was the only pastor who survived starvation and disease. Some days he conducted fifty funerals. At last, Rinkart negotiated a settlement with the Swedish army, and the siege was lifted.

Rinkart, believing that no healing could come to the village without gratitude, wrote this hymn. He dedicated the hymn to the survivors of Eilenberg, “Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices.”

The villagers sang. Hearts and souls were mended. Millions of us are singing it today.

Thank you, God, for everything.

Amen.

© David C. Fisher, 2008