

## COMMUNITY THANKSGIVING SERVICE

November 19, 2017

(Matthew 13:31-34)

First let me say that it's both an honor and a privilege for me to have this opportunity to bring you this brief reflection tonight. This is that time of year, of course, when we intentionally pause to consider all the many blessings we experience in this life. And then gather together, *like this*, to give our thanks and praise.

We come together this evening from all across our community, from different faith traditions, and perhaps even with different motivations for being here.

I'm reminded of the story about the elderly man, living down in Phoenix, who one year – several days before Thanksgiving – called his son in up New York and said to him, “I hate to ruin your day, son, but I have to tell you that your mother and I are getting a divorce; 45 years of misery is enough. We're sick and tired of each other, and just can't go on. Call your sister in Chicago and break the bad news to her.”

Naturally, the son was completely blindsided by this shocking revelation and, as soon as he got off the phone with his father, he frantically called his sister, who exploded over the phone, “Like heck they're getting a divorce,” she shouted. “I'll take care of this!”

So she immediately called Phoenix and got her father on the line. “You are NOT getting a divorce,” she told him in no uncertain terms. “Don't do a single thing until I get there. I'm calling my brother right back, and we'll both be there tomorrow. Until then, don't do a thing. DO YOU HEAR ME?”

The father then smiled as he hung up the phone, turned to his wife, and said, “Okay, honey. The kids *are* coming for Thanksgiving this year. And they're even paying for their own plane tickets.”

...Hopefully, no one had to trick *you* into coming out this evening. Hopefully, all of us are here because we know that Thanksgiving is not merely a historical tradition, or a cultural phenomenon, or even a family obligation. But, in reality, an important and necessary moment in which we pause to take the time to *appreciate* all the many things in our lives that we so often take for granted.

Long before it was an American holiday, it was a biblical practice. Long before there were Pilgrims, there were people of faith who *understood* that everything they enjoyed in this life came from God's gracious hand.

Unfortunately, however, we live in a culture that was founded upon – at least in part – the mistaken notion of the so-called “self-made” man or woman. That is, the completely mistaken idea that any of us – simply by virtue of our own hard work and effort and intellect – can somehow achieve a successful and fulfilling life.

One of my all-time favorite movies is the 1965 film *Shenandoah* starring Jimmy Stewart. Stewart plays a Virginia farmer named Charlie Anderson who is trying to keep his family out of the Civil War.

Because he promised his late wife that he would raise their children in the Christian faith that was so important to her, Charlie religiously offers a table blessing whenever they gather for a family meal. However, his own indifference to such matters of faith is on full display when we actually *hear* the prayer he then offers:

“Lord, we cleared this land,” he prays. “We plowed it, sowed it, and harvested it. We cooked the harvest. It wouldn't be here – we wouldn't be eatin' it – if we hadn't done it all ourselves. We worked dog-boned hard for every crumb and morsel... But we thank you just the same anyway, Lord, for this food we're about to eat. Amen.”

In other words, Charlie Anderson paid lip-service – *at best* – to God’s gracious hand in blessing his family’s efforts, and even making those efforts possible and productive in the first place. For giving them the fertile land to farm, the rains necessary for their crops to grow, the livestock that provided them with food and other essentials. Not to mention, their own strength and wherewithal to then bring this all together. They were certainly hardworking and fruitful. But that’s not the point. Whether Charlie Anderson was willing to concede it or not, or to believe it or not, it was *God* who was the one behind all of their accomplishments and success...

Well, even though things are going pretty well for the Anderson’s as the movie opens – despite the war raging all around them – it’s not too long before events take a decided turn for the worse. Throughout the remaining course of the film, you see, the Anderson clan experiences one tragedy after another. The youngest son is mistaken for a soldier, captured, and sent to a prisoner-of-war camp. Another son and his wife are murdered by marauders. And a third son is mistakenly shot and killed by an over-zealous sentry.

Therefore, when we finally see Charlie Anderson and his family once again gathered at the dinner table, there are four more empty places in addition to the one that had once belonged to his late wife. At first, he begins his prayer ritual just as he always did. But *this* time we hear his voice start to quiver and break as the awful realization washes over him that he is *not* in control; that he is *not* the master of his own destiny.

His voice trails off as he finishes the words, “...if we hadn’t done it all ourselves.” He stops at that point and walks away; a proud man, now broken and stripped of that pride, finally recognizing that he ultimately needs to acknowledge and pray for God’s hand in his life...

In *Shenandoah*’s final scene, the family arrives for worship – late as usual. And as the service begins, that youngest son who’s been gone for so long, and presumed dead, now hobbles into the church aided by a crutch. The family turns. First, in disbelief. And then, in unabashed joy. As the pastor then leads them in the hymn: “Praise God, from whom all blessings flow.”

You see, we *all* need to acknowledge and pray for God's gracious hand in our lives. Not just the fictional Charlie Anderson. For there is not a single thing that we possess, or have *achieved*, in this life that did not come only because *God* has blessed our efforts and *given us* the wherewithal to bring it all about.

Even in the two parables we heard this evening from the Gospel of Matthew, the focus was not on the one who sowed the mustard seed, nor the woman who mixed the leaven with three measures of flour. No. The parables are not about the human effort at all, but rather the seed and the yeast themselves. In other words, the kingdom of heaven comes about only as a direct consequence of God's gifts of grace.

Our *own* role, as human beings, is simply to receive these gracious gifts from God and then use them to God's glory. We *all*, therefore, need to "praise God from whom all blessings flow." And *that* is the essence of our Thanksgiving holiday.

Let us pray... Almighty God, Lord of heaven and earth, we humbly pray that your gracious providence may give and preserve to our use the fruitfulness of the land and the seas, and may prosper all who labor therein; that we, who are constantly receiving good things from your hand, may always give you thanks. Amen.