

## "Give Thanks"

An elementary teacher in Tennessee tells about reading one-on-one with a first grade student who encountered the words "thank you" for the first time in print. Hoping that the student would use some of the things she taught the class about reading, she gave the little girl some time to figure out the words herself. After a few moments, she decided to tell the little girl the first word, so she said, "Thank". When the student didn't repeat the word, the teacher said it again, "Thank." With that, the little girl, in her native Tennessee dialect said, "I *am* thanking! I *am* thanking!"

Well, are you "thanking"? We're getting close to Thanksgiving Day, one day set aside to give thanks. But for the follower of Jesus, *every day* should be "thanksgiving day". For instance, Ephesians 5:20 says, "*Always* giving thanks to God the Father for *everything*."

Many Scriptures tell us to have an *attitude of gratitude*, a thankful approach to life. Many of the psalms in the Old Testament are psalms of *thanksgiving* – hymns, or poems, or prayers expressing gratitude to God. One of these psalms is Psalm 111. It's actually a hymn, probably sung in the temple. It contains 22 short lines, and it's an *acrostic* – the beginning of each succeeding line starts with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

In this Psalm the writer thanks and praises God for a number of things: for all the works of God, His marvelous creation; for food (perhaps thinking back to how God provided manna in the wilderness); for God's precepts and laws; for the redemption and salvation of His people

Using this psalm as a guide, let's think about things we have to be thankful for. ***First of all, as an individual.*** The psalm begins: "Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord *with my whole heart*" (Psalm 111:1). *The Message* paraphrases this: "I give thanks to God with everything I've got!" What do you have to *really* be thankful for? Do you have enough to eat? Clothes to wear? A warm home in the winter? Do you have your health? Friends?

*Think of the people in our lives – people along the way who've helped us, encouraged us, believed in us.* Occasionally we hear of someone who's heralded as a "self-made man" or a successful, "self-made woman." But I doubt there is such a person. We have all benefited in some ways from what others have given us or done for us.

How much do we thank the people who have blessed us in one way or other? Roy Rogers was a famous cowboy movie star, a Christian, and an all-around good guy. After Roy starred in his first movie, he began receiving huge stacks of fan mail that he wanted to answer. But his salary of \$150 a week didn't even cover the required postage. He talked to the head of Republic pictures hoping that the studio would handle some of his fan mail. He was turned down, and told he was foolish to want to answer every letter because nobody else did that. It took too much time and money. But Roy couldn't accept that. He felt if people thought enough of him to write, he should have enough regard for them to answer and thank them. So Roy took his show on the road. He traveled many miles and performed countless one night shows to raise enough money to pay the salaries of the four people it took to answer his fan mail.

*Who do you and I need to thank today?* Our parents, for all the time and effort and money it took to raise us. Our kids, for what's good about them (instead of being critical). Thank our spouse, for cooking a good meal, or repairing something in the home. Thank a friend, for being such a good friend. I took accordion lessons for 10 years from a lady who not only taught me music, but taught me about life. She took an interest in me, was patient with me, encouraged me. Years later I wrote her a letter to thank her. She's been gone for a number of years now. I'm glad I took the time to write that letter.

*What about thanking God for the people in our lives who are a pain!* The "sandpaper people". They can rub against us as sandpaper, but that sandpaper can smooth out some of our rough edges and help us to grow. A woman named Ruth Myers has a prayer of thanks for these people:

"Father, I thank you for the people in my life who seem to bring more pain than joy, for I believe you have let our paths cross for important reasons. Thank you for the good things you want to do in my life through the things that bother me. I'm grateful that you are with me to meet my needs...even when those close to me fail to do so. I'm so glad that you are also within me working to make me more like Jesus – more patient, more gentle, more loving – through the very things I dislike. And so, though I may not feel grateful, I give thanks for them by faith...thank you that by your power I can receive them as you receive me – just as I am, warts and wrinkles and hang-ups and all...".

*How about maintaining a thankful spirit even when things aren't going our way.* It's harder to be thankful when life isn't good to us, isn't it? But remember the verse in Ephesians: "Giving thanks to God the Father *at all times and for everything.*"

A man named Robert Greene was severely injured in a head-on traffic collision. He spent weeks in a coma, and over a year in rehab, before he was able to leave the hospital. During this grueling and painful time, he wrote a letter to his mother listing 10 reasons he had to be thankful in his situation. For instance, reason #3, "I have good strength in my arms. This helps me move with the wheelchair and helps me walk with crutches." Reason #6: "Nearly everything I have experienced has been of value and support to me." Reason #10: "I am thankful for the future, for it holds not a promise but a challenge and an opportunity." How different when we have a *grateful* attitude and not a *gripping* attitude!

We can be thankful, as individuals. But we can also be thankful **as the church**. The psalmist said, "I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, *in the company of the upright, in the congregation*" (Psalm 111:2). If this was a song, sung by the Hebrews when they worshiped in the temple, imagine the people singing loudly and with gusto, "I will thank the Lord with all my might, in this great congregation!"

*We have much to be thankful for as Community United Methodist Church.* For our worship team: the singers, Mike, Steve, Elizabeth. Aren't we blessed, being a small church, with limited resources, for the quality of music? I think so. We can be thankful for those of you who've been faithful to this church for many years. For some of you – 30, 40, 50 years! When others left for

one reason or another, you've stayed. Your attendance at worship. Your service to the church. Your financial support. This church has been blessed by you. I'm certainly thankful for you. And for those of you newer to the church, and for your commitment.

I hope that you have a heart of gratitude for this church because it's been a spiritual home for you. Times when you've sensed God's presence in worship. When you were going through a rough time and your sisters and brothers in Christ cared about you and were there for you. Perhaps you still feel gratitude for a loving pastor who baptized your children or buried a loved one.

Later in the service, we will have an opportunity to put an estimate of giving card in a basket by the altar. This financial commitment can be an expression of our gratitude for this church and all it means to us. I still have a warm place in my heart, and a thankful spirit, for the church I grew up in as a child and youth. For those in that church who led me to Christ, and gave me a solid foundation for a faith that has carried me through life.

*We can be thankful for the universal Church – the Church of Christ throughout the world – and as part of that worldwide fellowship give our thanks to God.*

The writer of Psalm 111 said, "He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever." If we have repented of our sins and trusted Christ as our Savior, we are part of God's redeemed people, saved by the blood of Christ. We are part of God's *covenant people*, those bound to God and in a relationship with God through the new covenant (or agreement) God established through the death and resurrection of Jesus! We can be thankful for what the Church (that covenant community) has meant to the world throughout human history.

In our American culture, fewer and fewer people appreciate the Church, or have a positive view of the Church. The news media, for the most part, only covers the bad stuff – the clergy scandals, the weird extremists who don't represent the majority of people in our congregations. And because our American culture is becoming more secular, fewer people have any place in their life for God or His Church.

As a result, many today ignore the positive contributions the Church has made to people and society throughout history: keeping learning alive in the dark ages, setting up schools for learning, and hospitals for the care of the sick, championing the abolition of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's. It's the Church and Church organizations that often house food banks, provide homeless shelters, help resettle refugees, provide free meals – all out of compassion for those in need. And, of course, it is the Church that is given the task of telling the world about Jesus – and the salvation and new life and hope that can be found only in Him!

Let's remember to give thanks to God *together* as His people, and to thank God **for** the Church and all it means to us!

The writer of Psalm 111 said, "I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart." We can be thankful to God as an individual...we can be grateful to God together as the church...and we can give thanks to God *as a nation*.

In verse 6 of Psalm 111 it says, "He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations." The psalm writer remembers how God has blessed the nation Israel, how God chose them to be His people, and enabled them to overcome other nations and give Israel its own land and future!

Now the United States is not God's people! Israel had been given a special place in God's plan for the world – to reveal God to all the nations - although they failed, and that's why Jesus came. But can we ever deny the fact that we have been blessed as a nation? Blessed with an abundance of natural resources? Blessed with freedom? Blessed with material wealth and prosperity?

Yet the mood of our time is to focus on all of our faults as a nation (and there are plenty of them) – in our history, and in our present - and ignore what is good about the United States. In fact, there is a movement to *dismantle* our way of life, and replace it with a different form of government. We see this cultural war being played out today before our very eyes.

We are blessed as a nation, and it's easy to take this for granted. My dentist is a follower of Jesus. He has gone on a number of mission trips to poorer countries to provide free dental care to people who normally have no dental care. I had an appointment one of the times right before he left for one of these mission trips, and he said how when he's gone he always realizes how fortunate we are in the U.S. and how much we have. But he says that appreciation lasts for a few days, and then it's so easy to go back to the mindset where we take for granted what we have and think we're entitled to it.

A woman named Carol decided she wanted to do something nice for her neighbor, Mrs. Smith, so she baked her a pie and carried it next door. When Mrs. Smith opened her door, she was surprised to see Carol holding the pie. She said, "For me? Oh, thank you so much! You just don't know how much I appreciate it! You are so thoughtful for doing this! Thank you." Because Mrs. Smith liked the pie so much, Carol decided the next week to bake her another one. When she took it over, Mrs. Smith opened the door and said, "Thank you so much. You are so kind!" When she took another pie over the following week, Mrs. Smith said, "Thanks." Carol took another pie over the next week and Mrs. Smith responded, "You're a day late with the pie."

The following week she baked her another pie. This time her neighbor said, "Try using a little more sugar and don't bake it quite so long. The crust has been a bit hard lately. And I'd like cherry instead of apple next time."

Well, Carol was much more gracious than most of us. She didn't stop her pie baking. But the next week she was so busy that she wasn't able to bake. When Carol passed by the neighbor's house on the way to the store, Mrs. Smith looked out and noticed Carol wasn't carrying a pie. She then stuck her head out the door and yelled, "Where's my pie!"

I see this as a kind of parable demonstrating how a spirit of *entitlement* and *ingratitude* can set in. We get used to our blessings. After enjoying them for a while, we begin to figure that we deserve them. Instead of being thankful, we start complaining. It can easily happen.

This coming Thursday is Thanksgiving Day – one day our nation has set aside to be grateful to God as a nation. I worry if, as a nation, we can no longer take one day out of the year to focus on our blessings as a country. When we call it "Turkey Day" instead of Thanksgiving Day. When we can't close our stores and shops for one day to give shoppers and employees one day off to pause and reflect, and thank God for what the good Lord has given us.

The writer of Psalm 111 said, "I give thanks to God with everything I've got!" Not a bad thing to do! Not at all!

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