

Spirit of Thanksgiving
Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Colorado Springs, CO
November 23, 2014 (Thanksgiving Sunday)

Matthew 25:34-45, The Message

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Enter, you who are blessed by my Father! Take what’s coming to you in this kingdom. It’s been ready for you since the world’s foundation. And here’s why: I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was homeless and you gave me a room, I was shivering and you gave me clothes, I was sick and you stopped to visit, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then those ‘sheep’ are going to say, ‘Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?’ Then the King will say, ‘I’m telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me – you did it to me.’ Then he will turn to the ‘goats,’ the ones on his left, and say, ‘Get out, worthless goats! You’re good for nothing but the fires of hell. And why? Because – I was hungry and you gave me no meal, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was homeless and you gave me no bed, I was shivering and you gave me no clothes, Sick and in prison, and you never visited.’ Then those ‘goats’ are going to say, ‘Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or homeless or shivering or sick or in prison and didn’t help?’ He will answer them, ‘I’m telling the solemn truth: Whenever you failed to do one of these things to someone who was being overlooked or ignored, that was me—you failed to do it to me.’”

Holidays seem to always come with both good and bad, don’t they? We often have so many expectations, but then there are that many more opportunities to mess up, for things to not go as you’d like. There’s the good opportunity to gather with family, but there’s the possibility that you might actually dread spending time with that family, or you might not *have* family with which to gather, or, you just don’t have the resources to do the traveling that it might take to be with family. For so many, *too* many, there might not even be resources to put more than one meal a day on the table on a normal day, much less a *feast* for a holiday. But at the same time, even if they are also accompanied by anxieties and sorrows, Thanksgiving and Christmas are also joyous occasions to elicit a certain attitude of thanks and joy. They are at least times to *think* of good things, even if the activities fall short.

It might be a comfort that *these* two holidays, especially, have *always* combined both good and bad. The events that the holidays celebrate certainly weren’t perfect. The birth of Jesus was a wonderful event, but really, it happened in less-than-ideal conditions. And Thanksgiving...let’s talk about Thanksgiving. The *event* – the New England colonists, or pilgrims, celebrating their first harvest in the New World, the harvest that they could not have had without the help of the Native American peoples, was a wonderful thing, a foundation of European presence in North America, and the foundation of what we now have as the United States of America. But, it also comes with some pretty awful undertones. “As journalist [Robert Jensen states](#), ‘The real thanksgiving was preceded by a European colonist slaughter of hundreds of Native Americans;’ all for the purpose of gaining supremacy of the land

and its resources. As a result of this unfortunate history, though most Americans view Thanksgiving as a day of national pride and gratitude, many [Native Americans view it as a day of mourning](#). So it could be said that the real story of Thanksgiving is rooted in a mixed history of praise and pain.”¹

The holidays started as a mix of good and bad. And yet, “as [one author ([Jane Kamensky](#))] says, **‘...holidays say much less about who we really were in some specific Then, than about who we want to be in an ever changing Now.’**” Another writer, Billy Honor, comments on this statement – “I think she’s right about this. In so many cases, our national celebrations and observances are **mere expressions of our collective aspirations and not our actuality.**”²

He continues, “Given this reality, why should the underside of Thanksgiving matter to us? The answer is simple. It matters because poor people matter. It matters because we are knit together in an inextricable web of mutuality that should make it difficult for us to have a day of thankfulness for what we have that doesn’t include concern for those who have very little.”³

I like that word, concern. It says something different to me than pity, or even compassion. Both of those phrases seem to speak of “better than.” But, concern doesn’t. It simply speaks of *care*, of concern for well-being. In fact, it reminds me of Jesus, and the great *care*, love, and concern, that Jesus showed for the crowds and “least of these” who followed him.

For good and bad, we celebrate this Thanksgiving holiday in a Christian context. The original celebrants gave thanks to God for this harvest that they believed came from God’s favor. And for us, modern Christians today, we look at our own gratitude, and what it means in this Thanksgiving season.

The best definition of gratitude I’ve heard is that it is “recognition of the good things in your life, especially the things that are out of your control, and the things that you didn’t get or achieve alone.” It’s the second part of that definition – especially the things that are out of control – that have pointed us to God again and again for our gratitude.

My strongest feelings of thanksgiving have been for things that *should* have gone badly but didn’t – perhaps like the Pilgrims trying to survive in a foreign land with little preparation before winter, and for the people that they thought of as non-human, dispensable, to make survival possible for them. That is certainly something that *logically* shouldn’t have happened by their perspective, but did anyway. Or, thanksgiving for the things that have shaped my life that have nothing to do with my own choices – the wonderful family I have; the love that has been shared with me through them, my friends, and God.

¹ Honor, Billy. <http://www.odysseynetworks.org/on-scripture-the-bible/jesus-poor-people-underside-thanksgiving-matthew-25-31-46/> Nov 17, 2014

² *ibid*

³ *ibid.*

When you recognize, when you *admit*, that your circumstances aren't entirely under your control, gratitude is easier. And that's also when it becomes an act in and of itself: **gratitude is an act of worship because it reminds us that there is power beyond us.**

We might already recognize God's presence, God's power in our life, and yet we don't always *respond* in the ways that God might want us to.

We are in this web of mutuality – that web that should make it difficult for us to have a day of thankfulness for what we have that doesn't include concern for those who have very little. That sounds a lot like something Jesus might say. From the words of Jesus that we have reported to us, I think Jesus would be very interested in how we, committed followers of his teachings and love, spend a day dedicated to thanksgiving, gratitude.

The Scripture this morning is one oft-repeated and well-known; how does it change when we read it in the context of gratitude and *concern*?

If we respond to gratitude with concern for others who have very little, this scripture reminds us who that concern is for. It is for, traditionally translated, the “least of these,” and it is for Christ, who cares *so much* for each person that his care cannot be separated from the person. Hear that again – Christ *cares so much* for each and every person that his care and love cannot be separated from that person.

If we are to follow Christ and care and love these ones, we have to find out who they are. Who are the “least of these”?

The Message translation gives another helpful perspective, translating “the least of these” as “someone overlooked or ignored.” Who are they? The Scripture gives us a start, but the list is not exhaustive. Hungry, thirsty, homeless, cold, sick, imprisoned. In other passages in the Bible referencing the ones who need special help, the Bible refrains again and again the widow, the orphan, the stranger.

And so we ask again, in our current context, who are the least of these? Who is overlooked and ignored? *Who is it who has a really hard time making their lives better, or simply sustaining themselves, under the current structures and restrictions of our society?*

Native Americans, certainly. Mentally ill. Single mothers who are low-skilled and thus can only make minimum wage. Immigrants. Those with a “record.” Prostitutes. Those with physical disabilities. Those with addictions. Anyone experiencing homelessness. Those who for whatever reason lack acceptable social skills. And certainly, the ill who don't have medical benefits.

You don't have to feel guilty if this list does not include you, or if you are thinking right now –

“Thank God that I am not one of those.”

But, recognize that this list is important to *you* – back to that “web of mutuality”: “It matters because we are knit together in an inextricable web of mutuality that should make it difficult for us to have a day of thankfulness for what we have that doesn’t include concern for those who have very little.”⁴

It is up to you, as a Christian, as a follower of our Savior Jesus Christ, to respond to this list, this scripture, this holiday, by practicing gratitude. As we end the church year and prepare for the new year at the start of Advent next week, how can we use the spirit of Thanksgiving holiday to *practice gratitude* throughout our New Year?

How can you recognize the good things in your life, especially the things that are out of your control, and the things that you didn’t get or achieve *alone*?

As you are practicing gratitude this year, ask yourself:

-Do I make a habit of recognizing the good things in my life, the things that I didn’t get or achieve alone?

If the answer is no, start. Cultivate that recognition by asking yourself at least daily – “what are the good things in my life? What makes me glad?” Write it down on a card (or in your bulletin or phone right now), put it in your car, on your mirror. Find a way to remind yourself to ask – “What are the good things in my life? What makes me glad?”

Then comes the response, the *action*.

If we believe that as Christians we should *respond* in some way because of our gratitude, our gladness, our appreciation, our recognition of the good things in our lives, what should those responses be? The answer can be encompassed in one word: share.

Share the things you have. If you have money, share your money. If you have the ability to speak on the behalf of someone else, do it. If you have the ability to spend time listening to someone’s story, sit down at the table and *listen*. Don’t assume you know a person’s full story already, even if that person is the person who raised you, or the person you raised, or the person with whom you have spent 50 years in marriage. Don’t assume you know the story of the person who’s dressed well, or the person wearing five dirty layers. Honestly, what their story *is* really doesn’t matter. What matters is that you will make that person’s life better by sitting and *listening to it*.

So share. Go out and buy one more turkey and drop it off at ESM or another donation site

⁴ Honor, Billy. <http://www.odysseynetworks.org/on-scripture-the-bible/jesus-poor-people-underside-thanksgiving-matthew-25-31-46/> Nov 17, 2014

today, write a check to a charitable organization, share a meal you've provided with someone who is hungry. Most importantly, stick to it. What would the ongoing living of gratitude look like? From now on, *practice* keeping gratitude present with you all the time, so that you recognize the opportunities for response when they come.

In conclusion – at the end of the sermon, and at the end of everything we are – is the good news of God.

Another pastor, a young clergywoman, wrote of this Scripture text: “Feed, house, clothe, visit... these are systemic problems that require systemic answers that overwhelm most churches, right? No matter what we do, it feels like a drop in the proverbial bucket. But this comes on the Sunday before Advent begins. It's almost a perfect Advent text. Because God, when faced with those *very same systemic problems* did not send a huge, earth-shattering, make-it-all-better answer, God sent a baby. God sent a way to set us on the path of systemic change, by starting with one little vulnerable one.”⁵

The good news is that wherever we are, however small and vulnerable we feel, however lacking we *know* we are, God uses us, with or without our knowledge. We have already been told and shown how God's kingdom comes to earth – in small acts, through vulnerable babies, in the love that already infuses the world.

There are always the “Thens” of the imperfections of our world. But there are also always the “Futures” that contain ever greater hope and love. Remember to keep asking, “what are the good things in my life?”, and give thanks.

Amen.

⁵ Eliza Buchakjian-Tweedy, Facebook post on Youngclergy Women Project