

Wesley United Methodist Church

November 20, 2016

“Good News About Thanksgiving.”

A few years ago, an American and a British journalist were discussing Thanksgiving on a British radio program. The American asked if Thanksgiving was celebrated in the United Kingdom. “Yes,” the British journalist replied, “but we celebrate it on the 6th of September. “Why, then?” asked the American. “That’s when you chaps left,” The Brit answered good-natured.

Thanksgiving in the U.S. is usually traced back to 1621 when a Pilgrim leader, William Bradford, proclaimed a day of feasting to commemorate the first harvest after a long year suffering. What you may not know is that, as the colonies grew more prosperous, the people forgot all about Thanksgiving and the meaning it held for their ancestors. For generations Thanksgiving was celebrated sporadically, if at all, with no set date.

Then in 1822, Sarah Hale, a young widow from New Hampshire, decided to revive this important celebration. Sarah, the mother of five children and an editor of a women’s magazine, began a 40-year campaign of writing editorials and letters to governors and presidents to get Thanksgiving officially recognized as a national holiday. Three Presidents turned her down. Her obsession became a reality, however. In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the last Thursday in November as an annual celebration of Thanksgiving.

It’s interesting that it should have been Lincoln that responded to Sarah’s request. His own life was at a very low ebb at the time. The country was literally falling apart and Lincoln’s political future looked bleak. Many of the members of his own cabinet openly despised him, and joked about him in public. His wife had been investigated as a possible traitor a process which Lincoln personally found to be bitterly wounding. In the face of such personal and national circumstances, Lincoln’s call for a day of prayer would have made sense. But a Thanksgiving? At a time like that? What must he been thinking of? No wonder historians count Lincoln as one of our truly great presidents.

Interesting enough, Sarah Hale, the widow who championed the cause of Thanksgiving is not remembered for that act. Rather she is much better known as the author of a little poem written in 1830 which begins like this: “Mary had a little lamb, its fleece was white as snow...and everywhere that Mary went, the lamb was sure to go.”

There is something healthy about giving thanks. Notice that I did not say there is something healthy about Thanksgiving meals. Most of us will over indulge this Thanksgiving, just as we do every Thanksgiving.

There is a humorous story that actress Helen Hayes used to tell on herself. As she retired to the kitchen to put the finishing touches to a Thanksgiving dinner she was preparing, she warned her family: “This is the first turkey I’ve ever cooked. If it isn’t right, I don’t want anybody to say a word. We’ll just get up from the table, without comment, and go down to the hotel for dinner.” She returned some ten minutes later to find the family seated expectantly at the dinner table—wearing their hats and coats.

I don’t think I’ve ever had a bad Thanksgiving meal. The danger isn’t that the meal won’t be tasty, the danger is that we will consume too much. Thanksgiving meals may not be too healthy for us, but the act of giving thanks is one of the most spiritually beneficial exercises we can perform. Because giving thanks reminds us how blessed we are.

If you woke up this morning and were able to hear the birds sing, use your vocal cords to utter human sounds, walk to the breakfast table on two good legs, and read the newspaper with two good eyes...you are more blessed than millions of those who could not do these simple things.

If you have never experienced the danger of battle, the loneliness of imprisonment, the agony of torture, or the pangs of starvation...you are ahead of 500 million.

If you can attend a church meeting without fear of harassment, arrest, torture, or death...you are more blessed than three billion people in the world.

If you have food in the refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof overhead and a place to sleep...you are richer than 75% of this world.

If you have money in the bank, in your wallet, and spare change in a dish some place...you are among the top 8% of the world’s wealthy.

If you are over thirty and either of your parents is still alive you are very rare. Over a billion people are orphans by then.

If you hold up your head with a smile on your face and are truly thankful...you are blessed because the majority can, but most do not.

Giving thanks reminds us how blessed we are. This is not to say that you and I do not have problems. We do, but for most of us, our blessings far outweigh our burdens.

What is there about many of us that we fixate on our burdens rather than our blessings? How can we say we are a people of faith, when so much of our life is lived not by faith, but by fear? Giving thanks reminds us how blessed we are. Giving thanks also reminds us how much God loves us. When you start counting your blessings, you are reminded just how good God has been to you. After all, these blessings don't just happen. There is a Source of everything we have.

And one final thing. When we give thanks we are reminded to share with others what the Lord has done for us. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus heals a man who has been possessed by a demon. Afterward, the man begs Jesus to let him come with him. He wants to be one of Jesus' disciples. Surprisingly, Jesus turns him down. Rather, he gives the man these instructions, "Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." So Mark tells us, "The man went away and began to tell in the city how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed."

If you are truly thankful for the blessings God has bestowed upon you, then share that story with others. Of course, the best way to share the story is to share the blessings.

You and I have been so blessed. We need Thanksgiving to remind us of those blessings and to remind us of the source of those blessings. Now we go out, as Jesus told the man healed in Mark's Gospel, to tell others, and to show others, "How much the Lord has done for us." That way, we can keep Thanksgiving all year long. Amen.