

Wesley United Methodist Church

November 24, 2013

"Thanksgiving Day!"

Psalm 100

It is interesting to note that it wasn't until this country was at war, the Civil War to be exact, that our Thanksgiving holiday was officially recognized by Congress. It had started in the small Plymouth Colony in 1621 when the English Pilgrims feasted with members of the Wampanoag Indians brought gifts of food as a gesture of goodwill. The custom grew in various colonies as a means of celebrating the harvest. In 1777, over 100 years later, the continental congress proclaimed a national day of thanksgiving in honor of the ratification of the Constitution and requested that the congress finally make it an annual event. They declined and it would be another 100 years and the end of a bloody civil war before President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the last Thursday in November Thanksgiving. The year was 1863. It might surprise you to learn that it took still another 40 years, the early 1900's, before the tradition really caught on. For you see, Lincoln's official Thanksgiving was sanctioned in order to bolster the Union morale. Many Southerners saw the new holiday as an attempt to impose Northern customs on their conquered land.

Thanksgiving today is a mild-mannered holiday full of football, turkey, hot apple pie, and family reunions. But that's not a realistic historical picture of Thanksgiving. It is more often born of adversity and difficult times. So many of the greatest expressions of thanksgiving have occurred under circumstances so debilitating one wonders why people give thanks. A more reasonable response would be bitterness and ingratitude.

It's a paradox. In times of plenty we become indifferent. The smallest gifts are overlooked and unappreciated. We might even regard the basic pleasures of life with contempt. But, let hard times come and the threat that these gifts will be taken from us and we are jolted into sudden recognition and gratitude. What are the characteristics of a truly grateful people? I would like to share three observations in answer to that question.

The first characteristic of a truly grateful people is remembrance. When we are truly grateful we are slow to forget what made us grateful. Our reading this morning is from the book of Psalms. In all there are 150 psalms, which can be categorized into prayers of help, hymns, royal hymns, and songs of thanksgiving, but there is no mention of deliverance from hardships. Most of the Thanksgiving Psalms give an account of some great distress but not Psalm 100. The author wishes for the worshiper, in a spirit of giving thanks, to remember their own distress and trials.

The second characteristic of a truly grateful people is humility. When we are truly grateful we humbly confess that we are indebted to God, that we belong to him and that we are not our own. Look at the Psalm again. In the first two verses there is a call gone out to all the earth to come and worship, worship the Lord with Gladness. In the next two verses the psalmist calls upon the world to recognize that it is God who made us. That we are his. We are his people, the sheep of his pasture. It is a sobering moment, one that should cause us all to pause and recognize God's sovereignty over us.

The third characteristic of truly grateful people is their recognition of the goodness of God. When we are truly grateful we come to understand that God's mercies endure forever. This is the central focus of Psalm 100. When the congregation enters the gates of the temple and comes into the sanctuary together they confess that there will be no end to the Love of God.

Let us celebrate Thanksgiving in remembrance, humility, and understanding that the Lord is good, his mercies endure forever. Amen.