

Wesley United Methodist Church

November 22, 2015

"The Present."

Matthew 6:25-33

Welcome to this Thanksgiving service. We are grateful to God for all His gifts to us. Our text for today draws us to a gift that sometimes we take for granted. And yet it is one of the greatest gifts God has given us.

There was a story in *Reader's Digest* years ago about a young man who took his girl home at the end of their first date. Emboldened by the night, he decides to try for that important first kiss. With an air of confidence, he leaned with his hand against the wall and, smiling, he said to her, "Darling, how about a goodnight kiss?"

Horrified, she replied, "Are you mad? My parents will see us!"

"Oh come on!" he said, "Who's gonna see us at this hour?"

"No, please," she implored. "Can you imagine if we get caught?"

"Oh come on," he said, "there's nobody around, they're all sleeping!"

"No way" she countered. "It's just too risky!"

"Oh please, please," he said, "I like you so much!"

"No, no, and no. I like you too, but I just can't!"

"Oh yes you can. Please?"

"NO, no. I just can't."

"Pleeeeeease?"

Out of the blue, the porch light goes on, and the girl's sister shows up in her pajamas, hair messy. In a sleepy voice the sister says: "Dad says to go ahead and give him a kiss. Or I can do it. Or if need be, he'll come down himself and do it. But for crying out loud tell him to take his hand off the intercom button!"

Sometimes life doesn't work out exactly how we planned. And what do we do at such times? We get embarrassed. We get down on ourselves. We worry and we sulk and we make the people around us miserable. And what good does it do? And so on this Thanksgiving Day we turn to the Gospel of Matthew and we read some of the most important words ever written . . . from the Sermon on the Mount:

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?"

"And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you--you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Doesn't that passage put our lives into perspective--we who have so much? I read somewhere that some birds sing more than 2,000 times per day. Don't they know that this is a cruel world where birds are shot by hunters and sucked into jets in the skies? Someone has said, a bird doesn't sing because it has an answer; it sings because it has a song.

The Pilgrim Fathers, of whom we are reminded every Thanksgiving, didn't have much to be thankful for. They had been hounded out of one country, tried settling in another but that didn't work out. They fled persecution and sailed across the ocean in that bucket of a ship they called the Mayflower. When they got here they were met with a land that needed to be tamed, a hostile environment, new diseases, inclement weather, starvation, and challenges they had never dreamed of. How did they handle it? They gave thanks.

Will Rogers was right years ago when he said, "In the days of our founders, they were willing to give thanks for mighty little, for mighty little was all they expected. But now, neither government nor nature can give enough but what we think it's too little. Those old boys in the fall of the year, if they could gather in a few pumpkins, potatoes and some corn for the winter, they were in a thanking mood. "But if we can't gather in a new Buick, a new radio, new clothes and some government relief, why, we feel like the world is against us." As usual Will was right on target.

It's like something that the late Erma Bombeck once wrote while she was going through her struggle with cancer. It went like this: "An estimated 1.5 million people are living today after bouts with breast cancer. Every time I forget to feel grateful to be among them, I hear the voice of an eight-year-old named Christina, who had cancer of the nervous system. When asked what she wanted for her birthday, she thought long and hard and finally said, "I don't know. I have two sticker books and a Cabbage Patch doll. I have everything!"

Erma Bombeck says, "The kid is right." Think about that for a moment. A little girl has a terrible cancer, but because she has two sticker books and a Cabbage Patch doll, she thinks she has everything!

If we aren't careful, Thanksgiving can be the most superficial holiday of the year. We start thanking God for our affluent lifestyle, for the new flat screen TV and the SUV out in the driveway, and the cruise we took last spring, and the multitude of toys we will give our kids this Christmas, and we have no awareness that there are people out somewhere who have nothing . . . nothing but the clothes on their back and yet they, too are giving thanks. Indeed, some of them are more thankful than some of us. They are giving thanks for the gift of knowing Jesus.

We thank God for our good health and we forget about people who, even as we worship, are in hospital beds struggling for their very lives. And yet, even there, some of them have a word of thanksgiving on their lips.

Dr. Craig Barnes tells a story about one Thanksgiving morning the telephone rang at his home while his family was preparing for a great feast. It was a nurse at a local hospital saying that a member of his church was dying. Barnes was worried about the interruption this would cause in his family's plans for the day. He arrived at the hospital to find Jean, a seventy-eight year old member of the congregation surrounded by her family. She had had another heart attack and was not expected to make it through the day. Jean was about to die.

After Barnes prayed with the family and read some scripture, someone mentioned that it was sad for Jean to die on Thanksgiving. But Jean replied that it was a glorious Thanksgiving because she would soon be with the Lord. She then prayed for everyone in the room. Then she died.

While driving home Barnes realized that Jean was a saint. She had taught Sunday School for thirty-five years until her eyesight failed and then settled into a ministry of prayer for others. Jean had no worry about her fate because of her service to others. She was grateful for all that God had done for her. Barnes arrived home just in time to carve the Thanksgiving turkey, but Jean was on his mind, and all he could say as he carved the bird was that this truly was a glorious Thanksgiving.

Do you hear what I'm saying? Sometimes I think we should cancel Thanksgiving until we understand what true thanksgiving is. It's not about flat screens TVs or SUVs football, bull riding or nice houses or even good health, as precious as that is. Thanksgiving is about seeing life as a gift. It's not about constantly striving to have more. It is about resting our lives in the arms of our Creator and acknowledging--regardless of our circumstances--whether we live in the midst of abundance or in the parched land of misery--that God is our life, God is our hope, God is the Source of every good thing.

There's a wonderful illustration of this kind of awareness found in Dr. Spencer Johnson's little book *The Present*. *The Present* is about a little boy and an old man--an old man who appeared to be so happy and content that one day the boy walked up to the porch swing where the old man sat and asked, "Mister, why are you always so happy?" The old man said, "Son, it's because I have the present."

The little boy said, "I love presents." He wondered if the old man might help him get this present too. To his surprise the old man said the boy already had the present and once he recognized what it was, he too would be happy every day.

From that day forward the old man became a special part of the little boy's life. Even as a teenager the boy never forgot about that present. The old man reminded him that once he found the present everything else would fall into perspective. The boy wondered if it was magic. The old man explained it wasn't magic but it is magical and once you have the present you are content to be right where you are in that moment.

As the boy matured and received a college degree and his first job he still wondered about the present until one day it suddenly dawned on him. Excitedly he said to the old man, "It's not a hold-in-your hand gift, it's the present, the moment of time that is today, the now." With a warm smile and sparkling eyes the old man confirmed that he was right--it's enjoying the gift of time right now.

Over the next few years the young man married and had children. He was happy but life presented him many challenges. Each time he was tempted to let go of the present, the old man gave him advice that got him back on track again. Eventually, the old man died and everyone, rich and poor alike turned out for his funeral. Not long after, a middle-

aged man, this same boy now completely grown, sat contentedly in his swing. A little girl walked up to him. "Mister," she said to him, "Why do you look so happy?" "Oh young lady," he said, "it's because I have this present." She told him she loved presents and wondered if he might help her get this present too.

Friends, in today's lesson from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is giving us the present: "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear . . ." Be thankful in your heart for the present that he alone can give.