

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

Rev. Dr. John V. Callahan Jr.

Sermon Text: Colossians 3:12-17 & Philippians 2:14-16

Sermon Title: "Thanksgiving: What It Is and What It Can Be" (Thanksgiving message)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

November 24, 2013

Thanksgiving is a wonderful holiday. It is a holiday full of food, family, and football. Thanksgiving is the holiday, on which many families come together to fill a house to capacity, and to surround a table with laughter and joy. This Thursday, we will gather with family to eat as much food as we can, usually more food than we eat in one sitting. We will waddle into the living room and plop down onto couches to let our banquet digest. Some of us might return to the kitchen and pick another piece of meat off the bird or run our fingers through the whipped cream on top of the pumpkin pie. Some will watch the Cowboys or Lions or Steelers play other teams, dozing off during halftime. Some will kibitz in the kitchen, negotiating over which leftover to save in the refrigerator. Thanksgiving is a wonderful holiday for food, fellowship, and football, and every year we look forward to its arrival.

When Abraham Lincoln instituted Thanksgiving,

he wanted the whole nation to set time aside to reflect on their lives, to take an inventory of all that God had given them, and then celebrate those blessings with food and fellowship, which are fitting things to have when celebrating anything. The tradition of football on Thanksgiving came many decades after Lincoln, but we won't get into that.

Thanksgiving as a holiday is good to have, because it gives us a chance to reflect on what we have and what we do, whom we love and who loves us. Thanksgiving doesn't allow us to take things or people for granted. It makes us appreciate our lives and be glad to live each day. It makes us appreciate our jobs, and we pray for those who are unemployed. Thanksgiving makes us appreciate the people we have in our lives and be glad to see their smiling faces and hear their warm words. We think of those who are no longer with us – the holiday helps us to remember them. Although we have a tear in our eye when we think of them, we hope we may smile at the memories of times well spent, even around the Thanksgiving table with its bounty of food.

During Thanksgiving, we can reflect on what is good. We count all of God's blessings and give thanks to God for every one. Sadly, though, for some families,

Thanksgiving is not a time to count blessings or to reflect on what is good. Thanksgiving is a time to hold grudges and reflect on what is bad in others.

We may have some friends who aren't looking forward to Thursday, not because they dread cooking a turkey or cleaning the house, but because they cannot get along with their parents or in-laws or relatives with whom they will have to spend an entire evening. Some of our friends dread their parents coming over, because they make critical comments about the ways our friends live. Parents may comment on anything, especially when it comes to their grandchildren. They comment on their grandchildren, and criticize how they are being raised. Parents still want to parent – they still want to be helpful. But grown children do not need the advice, especially if they do not ask for such advice. And so, the blessed day of Thanksgiving turns into something just short of torture. Our friends cannot wait to see their parents leave in their cars at the end of the day.

Some of our friends may not look forward to in-laws coming over. They just don't have a good relationship with them. It is said that behind every successful married man is a surprised mother-in-law. Some mother-in-laws don't approve of what their son-in-laws do, thinking they should get a better job, make

more money, spend more time at home. Even father-in-laws can be critical of the other side of the family. He might not say anything, but the scowl of his face and his short, abrupt conversations show his disapproval.

And then there are those relatives that might come over for Thanksgiving dinner. Grandma and grandpa who are hard of hearing and cannot carry a conversation with anyone. Aunts who pinch the cheeks of children when they come through the front door and plant huge kisses on their foreheads, leaving big red lipstick marks. Uncles who laugh out loud at every story, so that the shingles on the roof shake apart.

In certain families, there are family members that don't get along. They hold onto grudges that have never been resolved. Everyone stands on pins and needles the minute they enter the house on Thanksgiving Day. They hope the football game will keep them from talking to each other. They hope the preparations of the meal will keep them busy enough.

We all need to rediscover what Thanksgiving is all about. Thanksgiving needs to be put in its proper perspective: it is a time not to hold on to grudges but to count our blessings. It is a time not to unearth the

bad but to reflect on the good, and allow the good to overcome the bad. It is a time to gather and enjoy food and have fellowship and take pleasure in people's company.

What does Paul tell the Colossians and Philippians about being thankful and getting along? In Colossians, Paul says as God's chosen ones to clothe themselves in compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, patience, forbearance, and forgiveness.¹ There is a dress code when it comes to dealing with others, even those we don't get along with. The turkey on Thanksgiving isn't the only one that receives dressing. Clothe yourselves, Paul says, with all the virtues of God, those virtues that help us show companionship and not complaint. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul says that we should do all things without complaint, without disagreement.² When we reduce the complaining and disagreeing, we are able to shine better as beacons of light, lights that bring order and warmth and care. Paul says that we should act like children without blame, so that nobody may point the finger at us and say that we keep arguments and disagreements going.

The words in Colossians 3 and Philippians 2 are so

¹ Colossians 2:13-13.

² Philippians

simple, so much so they we might ignore them. How can getting along with people be so simple? Actually, it is more difficult to get along with others than it is to be at odds with others. It does take more work to keep the harmony of the household going than it is to give in to the possible chaos of Thanksgiving dinner. Yet, Paul's words should become our foundation for a pleasant Thanksgiving Day. The words should be our guide for a lovely evening with family. If these words rest in our hearts and minds, then we will be less likely to hold a grudge and more likely to open ourselves up and get to know others. We will be less likely to argue and more likely to speak kindly. Keeping the words of Colossians and Philippians will help us set the tone for being thankful and happy, and enjoying the evening with whomever comes to our house.

There was once a doctor named Murray Bowen, and he created a system of compassion and care called the Family Theory System. It was not Doctor Bowen's intent to create a system based on any Christian values, and yet it is interesting how his system mirrors the words of Paul to the Colossians and Philippians.

He used to analyze how families got along or didn't get along. He saw how everyone was connected to

each other through bloodlines *and* through relationships. The strongest bonds in a family were between parents and children, brothers and sisters, obviously. But there were other relationships that might not be as strong but are nonetheless relationships: grandparents and grandchildren, aunts and uncles, nephews and nieces. We might not feel connected as strongly to extended family as we do to our immediate family, but we still have to maintain relationships with extended family. And so, Dr. Bowen suggested that at family reunions, like Thanksgiving Day, we should spend more time with relatives we don't know than with those we do know. We need to meet those people again. We need to consciously seek them out and speak with them. Do not just let the relationship between distant relative be through a bloodlines alone, Dr. Bowen believed, let those relationship stay strong through conversation and connecting.

We should be like Benjamin Disraeli, a famous Prime Minister of Great Britain during the reign of Queen Victoria. Someone said of Disraeli, "After speaking with him, although I was in a crowd of people, he made me feel as though I was the cleverest person in the room." Seek out those relatives and people we do not know, and ask them about

themselves. Find out what their joys and struggles are. Find out what churches they go to and how they like them, or if they don't go to church find out why. Make them feel they are the cleverest, the most important, person in the room. Dr. Bowen believed that by talking to each other, everyone becomes more connected. Everyone has more compassion, and the whole family system grows stronger.

We cannot assume we know anything about our relatives, just because we sit in front of a TV, watching football in silence. We cannot assume we know anything about them, just because we are gathered around a table, gnawing on turkey wings and drumsticks. Talk to each other.

Men, don't just talk about good or bad plays when watching football – talk about what is happening in your lives, so that others may get to know you better. It is difficult for men to warm up to each other, because it feels so awkward. Open yourselves up and talk about substantial things. It takes a lot of work, but we will discover that we can know each other on different levels.

Both men and women, talk about your earliest memories of Thanksgiving and Christmas. Talk about the struggles you're facing at work. Tell a funny story

about what the kids or you did the other day. Talk about the crafts and hobbies. Talk about church and what God has done for you over the past week. Talk about substantial things, and everyone will understand each other better. Clothe ourselves in compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, patience, forbearance, and forgiveness. Become shining beacons of light above all argument or complaint.

Thanksgiving is a wonderful holiday. It is a holy day full of food, family, and even football. It also God's holy day to us, full of love and thanksgiving, of fellowship and building relationships. When the peace of Christ rules our hearts, Thanksgiving becomes a time of peace. When we appreciate all that God has given us, we appreciate others, and only love goes out to them. Let us have a wonderful Thanksgiving Day that we may remember for years to come.

