

November 20, 2016

Thanksgiving 2016

America's Wayward Holiday

Philippians 4:10-13

Opening words: Did you know the United States is not the only country to celebrate a Thanksgiving Day? There are a few others. Canada celebrates Thanksgiving on the second Monday in October. Granada and Liberia's Thanksgiving Days are political in nature. Thanksgiving Day in Granada is observed annually on October 25, the date the United States invaded their tiny nation, freeing them from the rule of Prime Minister Maurice Bishop. Thanksgiving Day in Liberia is observed on the first Thursday in November. It has been happening since 1820, the year the former American slaves returned to Africa to start their own country. In the Netherlands, Thanksgiving is observed in only one community, Leiden. The Pilgrims lived in Leiden from 1609-20. They left Leiden to settle in the New World. Annually, the contemporary citizens of Leiden gather at the local church on the fourth Thursday in November, to remember the hospitality their ancestors showed the Pilgrims. On Norfolk Island, which is owned by Australia, Thanksgiving is observed on the last Wednesday in November. The holiday was brought to the island by American whalers. The nation of Saint Lucia observes Thanksgiving on the first Monday in October. In the Philippines, the tradition of Thanksgiving Day ended in 1986. It is safe to say, in America Thanksgiving is here to stay. If you plan on observing Thanksgiving in some way this year, say, **"Amen!"**

We are instructed this morning from the epistle to the Philippians. It was written by the Apostle Paul, in the year 55 AD, during his incarceration in Ephesus. The reason he wrote to the Philippians was to thank them for an unknown gift. However, he takes the opportunity to encourage them in the faith. Our scripture reading for today is Philippians 4:10-13. Let me call this message *America's Wayward Holiday*.

Philippians 4:10-13 ¹⁰ I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹ I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³ I can do all this through Christ who gives me strength.

Benjamin Franklin once said, *"Contentment makes poor men rich; discontent makes rich men poor."* I find wisdom in that quote. If you find some wisdom in that quote, say, **"Amen!"**

You know the story. We look at it annually. Americans have been observing a day of thanksgiving for generations. Historians tell us the first recorded thanksgiving took place in Jamestown, Virginia. The winter of 1610 was harsh at Jamestown. Many settlers died. The group that once totaled 409 had been reduced to 60. Tradition tells us the survivors prayed for help, without knowing when or how it might come. God heard their prayers in the form of a ship filled with food and supplies from England. They organized a prayer meeting to thank God. There is no mention of a feast. Maybe that is why it is not the "famous" Thanksgiving?

The Thanksgiving we remember happened in 1621. The Pilgrims left Southampton, England in 1620. They wanted religious freedom. There were two ships filled with Pilgrims, the *Speedway* and the *Mayflower*. There was trouble from the start. As they sailed around the south tip of the British Isles, the *Speedway* was ruled unseaworthy. The two ships stopped and some of the Pilgrims went home. However, some of the *Speedway's* passengers boarded the other ship, the *Mayflower*. Because of the extra weight the trip took longer than the estimated 66 days. They had navigation problems too. They wanted to go to Virginia but they arrived in New England. It was November and the weather was growing harsh. There was no time to build permanent shelters, so they survived their first winter in the New World in crude temporary housing. In time, disease came and the death toll began to rise. Only 51 of the original 102 saw the spring. When spring came two things happened. First, the dead had to be buried. They were buried in unmarked graves so the local natives would not know how small their numbers had grown. Second, they were forced to make a painful choice. The *Mayflower* was a rented ship. It had to be returned. Would they stay in America, or return to England? They decided to stay and their luck began to change. Friendly Native Americans helped them plant 30 acres of wheat and build permanent shelters. By the fall of 1621, their homes were built and their crops were harvested. They decided to observe a day of thanksgiving to thank God for his blessings. The only good thing about hard times is that they help you appreciate the good times. The Pilgrims celebrated a day of thanksgiving, but they saw what they had, not what they wanted. Our time specializes in only seeing what we want. That is where the scripture begins to speak to us.

Today, we find ourselves in the fourth chapter of Philippians. These are some of the greatest words in the Bible. It is important you know that Paul wrote these words while incarcerated. He didn't know his future. There is no reason to believe he didn't fear execution. Knowing that fact makes verse 11 incredible. That verse says, "*I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.*" Did you hear what he said? He said you can learn to be content in any circumstance. Facing death itself, he learned to be content. Can I ask you a question? How content will you be on this Thanksgiving? If that question makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

I love the story of the rich industrialist who was disturbed to find a fisherman sitting lazily beside his boat. "Why aren't you out there fishing?" he asked. "Because I've caught enough fish for today," said the fisherman. "Why don't you catch more fish than you need?" the rich man asked. "What would I do with them?" "You could earn more money," came the impatient reply, "and buy a better boat so you could go deeper and catch more fish. You could purchase nylon nets, catch even more fish, and make more money. Soon you'd have a fleet of boats and be rich like me." The fisherman asked, "Then what would I do?" "You could sit down and enjoy life," said the industrialist. "What do you think I'm doing now?" the fisherman replied as he looked placidly out to sea. How content are you? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Thanksgiving distills down to a simple choice. Are you going to live your life looking at what you have? Or, are you going to live your life looking at what you want? It is a fair question. It is a relevant question. Let me be completely honest with you. This has been a hard year for many in this church. I have spent far too much time talking about diseases, deaths and disappointments. I have prayed countless times for situations that remained unchanged. It would be easy to spend this Thanksgiving looking at only the things we want. That is why this scripture speaks to us. Paul was facing the absolute worst situation, but he wrote about contentment. One of the great challenges of the faith is to learn to live contented lives. I want to help you today to learn to live contented lives by asking you two questions. If you are ready for these two questions, say, **"Amen!"**

Do you have a grateful heart?

History tells us the multimillionaire Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) gave a distant relative a one-million-dollar gift. At the same time, he gave \$365 million to various public charities. The relative cursed Carnegie because he received such a small gift. How can anyone survive on a million dollars? That is like receiving \$17 million in our world today. Maybe that is the story of our time? God has given us so much, but we complain because we want more.

This is question number one: Do you have a grateful heart? I say this every year. Thanksgiving is not a holiday. Thanksgiving is not a meal. Thanksgiving is an attitude. Do you see what you have, or do you see what you want? There is a world of difference between the two. Grateful people see what they have. Do you see how much you have?

Years ago, Erma Bombeck told the story of an eight-year-old girl by the name of Christina. She had cancer of the nervous system. When asked what she wanted for her birthday, Christina thought long and hard. She finally replied, "I don't know. I have two sticker books and a Cabbage Patch doll. I have everything I need!"

In life, we have a choice. We can see what we have or we can see what we want. A grateful heart sees what it has. This is question number one: Do you have a grateful heart? If an eight-year-old girl with cancer of the nervous system can be content with two sticker books and a Cabbage Patch doll, then you should be content with your life. God has been generous with us all. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Where does your soul find true contentment?

The big day is coming. No, I don't mean Thanksgiving. I mean Black Friday. It has become a tradition in many families. People get up extra early and go shopping. Each shopper is looking for extra savings. They tell us about 174 million Americans, both in stores and online, will be going shopping on Black Friday. Last year, the average shopper spent \$403.35. That means as a country we will spend approximately \$70 billion in one day on Christmas presents. I only have one word in response. WOW! Don't misunderstand me. There is nothing wrong with Christmas presents. I hope to get one 😊. However, the thrill of opening that gift will not last forever. The greatest gift you can give someone is yourself.

This is question number two: where does your soul find contentment? In the fifth century, a man named Arenius was determined to live a holy life. He abandoned the comforts of Egyptian society to follow an austere lifestyle in the desert. Yet, whenever he visited the great city of Alexandria, he spent time wandering through its bazaars. Asked why, he explained that his heart rejoiced at the sight of all the things he didn't need. How many of your possessions do you need?

Back in late August, the country of Italy was stunned by a 6.2 earthquake. The epicenter of that earthquake was near the town of Amatrice. It is a 2.5-hour trip from Rome by car to the northeast. The physical damage was depressing. Centuries old buildings, including churches, were reduced to rubble. The loss of life was devastating. That community lost 291 precious souls. They interviewed some of the survivors. One man said it hit at 2:00 in the morning. According to him, he was in bed with his wife. The motion and the noise woke them up. They thought they were going to die. He said, he and his wife held each other. If they were going to die, then they wanted to die together. That story struck my heart.

From a shortsighted human perspective, natural disasters only teach us one thing. The only thing that really matters in life is our relationships. Generally speaking, our possessions are easily replaced, but our relationships are irreplaceable. It is in your relationships that you find true contentment in your soul. If you find that to be true, say, "**Amen!**"

One of the things missing from my calendar this year is a Thanksgiving service. There was no mention about a service within my United Methodist circles. There was no discussion about a Thanksgiving service within my ecumenical circle. The reason is the same in both groups. People don't attend Thanksgiving services anymore. The times have changed. When I was young, the annual service was held on Thanksgiving morning. My home church shared a corner with two other religious organizations; St. Peter and Paul Catholic Church, and Beth Israel Synagogue. The three congregations would gather, with all their theological differences, on Thanksgiving morning to thank God for their blessings. It was great, but it ended years ago. When I entered the ministry, the service was held on Thanksgiving eve. Then it was held on the Sunday night prior. The outcome is the same. The pews were empty. Now they tell me Thanksgiving eve is one of the biggest party nights of the year. Old friends return home for the holiday. I find that reality to be very sad. The contrast between the 1621 Pilgrims and our contemporary society is shocking. The Pilgrims, in spite of all their hardship, saw what they had. Many of us, in spite of all we have, only see what we want. The tradition of the annual Thanksgiving service is dead because it is more important to get the turkey in the oven!

Why is thanking God for our blessings such a low priority? The reason is obvious. We don't look at what we have. We are more concerned with what we want. How content are you on this Thanksgiving? Old Ben Franklin was right! He said, "*Contentment makes poor men rich but discontent makes rich men poor.*" And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**