

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Thanksgiving – November 27th and 28th, 2013

Deuteronomy 8:18

“You may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth.”

Theme: Thankful for Physical Blessings

Let's see who knows a little history: What happened about this time of year in 1621? Tradition fixes the origins of this national holiday in Plymouth Plantation in what is now Massachusetts. It was a celebration after the Wampanoag Native Americans helped the pilgrims survive their first winter and avoid starvation by helping show them how to fish and cultivate crops like corn. After surviving that first winter and enjoying the fruits of their first harvest, the pilgrims and the Wampanoag had a thanksgiving festival. Harvest festivals were already common both to the Europeans and to the Native Americans. Often thanksgiving festivals were observed after a town was spared from war or disease. It just seemed appropriate to give thanks to God.

Who knows why the year 1863 was important for this holiday? The Continental Congress had already decreed a day of Thanksgiving in 1777 and the first President made a similar declaration in 1783. But it has been an annual observance in this country ever since President Abraham Lincoln made declaration for Thursday, November 26, 1863.

It wasn't until 1941, however, that the current set up for the holiday as we know it was fixed. In 1941 a federal law was passed fixing Thanksgiving as a federal holiday on the 4th Thursday in November.

What do all those years have in common? Were they relatively peaceful and stable times? Were they times when everyone was so successful and wealthy and healthy that they couldn't help but set aside a specific time and date to remember to say thank you to God? In 1621 the pilgrims barely survived starvation and extinction in the New World. In 1863 our nation was in the middle of a bloody Civil War. In 1941, World War II was heating up and every nation around the globe was feeling the threat of a global war.

2013: is it more like 1621, 1863, 1941 or 1500 BC? About 1500 BC the children of Israel had just gotten to the Promised Land of Israel. They had escaped from Egypt, been delivered from slavery and Pharaoh by God's miraculous might. They had been brought through a 40 year wandering in the wilderness and sustained miraculously by the Lord. Now Moses gives them a farewell sermon and warns them against forgetting all about the Lord.

How could they forget? Moses predicts why. They would eat and have their fill. They would build houses and become comfortable. They would have their own power and their own strength to produce their own wealth. They gotten into a routine and ultimately forgotten about God's goodness to them.

So today is your life full of war and bloodshed? Are you struggling just to get by or living under a constant fear of violence? Or are you comfortable, full, satisfied? In all these times, remember the Lord who is faithful to you, who sustains you and blesses you. Bless the Lord for His many blessings to you.

Philippians 4:12-13

“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. I can do all things through him who gives me strength.”

Theme: Thankful Giving and Contentment with Blessings

Something unusual happens each year at Thanksgiving. We invite people into our homes who wouldn't always gather together with us the rest of the year for a special meal. We are willing to share our favorite foods with our family and pass our favorite dishes around the table without feeling like we have to hide them and hoard them all to ourselves. But I guess it's easy. We have so much on these days. In times of plenty it's easy to give and give generously.

But how can we show more generosity on more occasions?

Notice the attitude that comes across clearly from the Apostle Paul in Philippians chapter 4. His joy just jumps off of the page. His thankfulness overflows from his heart to his readers'. You can't be phony, you can't hide your artificiality if you are in prison like Paul and writing to encourage fellow Christians. There was no way Paul could have been generous with his encouragement without first being content himself.

A dog will often times snap at any hand that tries to take away his bone and will be ready to bite anyone who threatens to take it away from him. He has to. He doesn't know if there will be any more. He is unaware that out in the garage there is another box of biscuits and bag full of bones.

Paul had learned generosity from life itself. Paul had learned from some pretty extreme experiences the depth of necessity and the excess of abundance. And through it all, he always had the strength necessary to meet any circumstance through the power of Jesus Christ.

So Paul even commends the Philippian Christians for their generosity. They too had the power of Christ in their hearts and in their lives. Because of that power in them, they understood the universal need for the Savior Jesus and the global reach of the gospel message. So they gave to God. They gave generously to support the spread of the gospel. Even in extreme need and in poverty they considered it a privilege to give in all circumstances.

So what is their secret? What is the secret to contentment? Is it what we have? When we compare ourselves to other parts of the country who are digging out from horrible storms and tornadoes do we learn contentment? Is it when we realize that even if we have a broken down old car it is still better than loading your entire family on top of a motorcycle or walking everywhere you need to go? Does it come from realizing that our pets eat better than some people? Today we take inventory of the many things for which we are thankful. But having more or less isn't what makes us truly content.

It's who we have. Having Jesus Christ gives us power because we know we have His forgiveness, His new life, His salvation. God has generously given us His best when He gave us His Son Jesus. As partners in the gospel then, we give to God the first and best of what we have in life to show Him our thanks.

Luke 17:15-16

“One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him – and he was a Samaritan.”

Theme: Thankful for Spiritual Blessings

What makes people truly happy? There have been studies and surveys in recent years to see which country is the happiest. Consistently at the top of these lists is the nation of Denmark. Experts theorize that Denmark is a relatively stable nation with a strong democracy. There are few threats to the safety and wellbeing of its inhabitants. They enjoy economic prosperity beyond that of many nations. But the Danes aren't the richest or the most powerful nation. So what makes them stand out?

When a news crew went to interview young Danes they found out firsthand. Even young adults don't expect too much. They don't expect to be extremely rich or overwhelmed by personal power. They just want to have a decent job and raise a family in peace. So expectations will help to avoid disappointment and depression.

How about Christians? Does Christian happiness come from lowering our expectations? The Bible consistently reminds us that God has high standards for His chosen and forgiven people. So that can't be it.

One thing that seems to stand out from this episode between Jesus and the one thankful leper is the faith of that leper. So maybe that means we should focus more and more on ourselves and the strength of our faith? We should concentrate on ways we can make ourselves more and more like Christ and imitate the life He left behind for us to follow?

Maybe we need to back up and see how the relationship between Jesus and this one thankful leper got started. Jesus went out of His way. He traveled an uncommon route and came dangerously close to a quarantined area full of extremely contagious and defiling souls. Jesus reached out to the lepers. Jesus demonstrated mercy. Jesus cleansed them without considering how thankful and grateful they would be to Him.

Isn't that similar to your relationship with Jesus? Jesus doesn't come to you because you are making yourself better, because you are so appealing or making yourself attractive to Him. The Bible shows us that before coming to faith in Jesus we could never achieve the status of a spiritual beauty pageant winner. No, Jesus marries you. He comes to you and me when we are substance abusing spiritual prostitutes and He weds you to Himself. He takes all your baggage and spiritual debt. Through His bond with you, you inherit the righteousness and life of Jesus. Miraculous union, this faith in Jesus.

Thankfulness and spiritual happiness, then, doesn't come as a consequence of being more like Christ. Being more like Christ comes from Christ in you, you dying and Christ bringing you to life through your baptism, keeping you alive through His Word. Instead of looking to yourself, looking more and more to Christ bears fruit so that we live more and more holy lives. That's the effect of faith. That's the result of your intimate union with Christ. Amen