



## *“The Transforming Power of a Grateful Heart”*

Deuteronomy 8:7-18; Matthew 6:25-33

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**November 19, 2006**

Thanksgiving Sunday

It's Thanksgiving week and that means most of us are preparing for that great American holiday. By Wednesday, trains, planes and automobiles will carry millions of us home for Turkey Day. Airplane and train terminals will be jammed with travelers. Highways will be packed with cars. It's the busiest travel time of the year.

By Wednesday afternoon, grocery stores will be madhouses of frantic last minute shoppers. Aisles clogged with carts and long checkout lines will frustrate the best of us. We are always a busy people, and this week most of will be very busy getting ready for Thanksgiving.

Then, Thursday morning will witness an amazing transformation. The streets and highways of America will be traffic free. Airline and train terminals will be eerily quiet. Parking lots will be empty. Shops, factories, offices and classrooms will be dark. The halls of Congress, statehouses and city halls will stand silent – a miracle in itself!

Busy America will stop for a day or two. We'll be home, at rest and giving thanks for all our blessings. We will recall our national blessings, the bounty of opportunity of this land. We will remember our personal and family blessings, too. Some will make lists; others will speak this thanks aloud. For a brief moment we will put aside our differences, cease criticizing national policy and national direction, and unite in saying “Thank you.”

Thanksgiving seems to bring out the best in us. There is something about gratitude to God that liberates what Abraham Lincoln called our better angels. Giving thanks always creates good things. In fact, gratitude is a transforming experience.

Just thinking about the Thanksgiving Days of my life causes me to remember and reflect on the goodness of life and the blessings of God.

My first memories of Thanksgiving are at my grandparents' farm an hour-and-a-half drive from our house. The farmhouse was small: a kitchen and a larger room that served as living room and dining room, plus two small bedrooms. The house was heated by an oil stove and grandmother's wood stove.

We usually arrived at the farm about mid morning and already the house was filled with the familiar smells of Thanksgiving. Mom helped Grandma in the kitchen and the rest of us settled in the other room to wait for the feast. Dad and Grandpa would talk, and my brothers and I sat and waited with nothing to do – and getting hungrier and hungrier.

By mid afternoon, when the feast was ready, the house was overheated and steamy. There was always more food than the table could hold and barely enough room for my family and my grandparents. Granddad prayed a simple prayer of gratitude to God for the bounty of the earth and the blessing of life. The ‘Amen’ was scarcely pronounced and

my brothers and I began digging in. I remember eating and eating, especially the mashed potatoes and my grandmother's fantastic gravy. I also remember running out of room before I could finish my heaping second helping.

Then came the quiet repose after the feast as Mom and Grandma talked softly in the kitchen, Grandpa snoozed on the couch, and dark crept over the land. I learned early on that Thanksgiving is about peace, quiet, food, and the joy of family together.

Too soon, I grew up, went out on my own, and got married. Gloria and I celebrated our first Thanksgiving together far away from home – just the two of us. Gloria cooked a small turkey – I took a picture of it – and baked an apple pie that was the best pie I'd ever eaten. Quickly our little feast was over, and we wondered what our gathered families were doing back home.

After our children were born, we went home occasionally for turkey day, but most of the time we lived too far away and developed our own traditions. For a number of years we shared Thanksgiving Day with old friends who lived close by – one year at our house, the next at theirs. Our children were about the same ages and after dinner they were off to play while we adults spent the rest of the day cleaning up, talking, and enjoying a day together. Thanksgiving became a day for the joy of friendship and family mixed together.

Now our children have families of their own and their own Thanksgiving traditions. Now we go to their homes for the holiday. This year we will spend Thanksgiving in Washington, D.C., with our son and his family. He will cook a scrumptious feast. He loves cooking for us and is very good at it. Our daughter and her family will come, too. The day will stir up old memories and create some new ones as a new generation rises up to sit at the Thanksgiving feast with us.

Thanksgiving is a unique day for Americans. It brings out the best in us and helps us see more clearly the things that really count in life.

Perhaps my memories stirred up your own memories of Thanksgiving. I suspect some of the themes are similar to the lessons I have learned over the years.

Above all, Thanksgiving is a day of gratitude to God for the bounteous blessings given to all of us. And that gratitude does amazing work in us – at least most of the time. Around the Thanksgiving table we will lay aside old hurts and resentments and join in the joy of feasting with loved ones and friends. United in gratitude, at least for a day, the table of thanksgiving will bring joy and depth of meaning to life: attributes that elude us too much of the time.

Gratitude puts life in perspective. Thanksgiving Day we always thank God for what we've been given, and that focus itself creates joy and reminds us of the goodness all around us.

Those friends with whom we used to share Thanksgiving received a terrible shock a number of years ago – a parent's worst nightmare. They discovered their daughter was a heroin addict. They intervened, got Stephanie in treatment and she's been sober ever since. The first Thanksgiving of her sobriety, her dad told her that he knew he was supposed to be thankful for everything, but he was having a tough time being thankful his daughter was an addict.

"Oh, I'm grateful," she told him. "I have an addictive personality, and heroin took me to the bottom quickly. Alcohol would have taken twenty-five years. I'm grateful I learned that while I'm young." Gratitude offers unique perspective.

I suppose part of the power of gratitude is that ultimately everything we have and are is a gift from God, and giving thanks is good for the soul. That's what the Old Testament Lesson makes clear. When we are grateful we are being genuinely human. And because being grateful is being a real human being, gratitude works in amazing ways in human relationships, too.

Imagine a table laden with Thanksgiving food and no one but yourself. The food is never the point; instead the great mounds of food point to God and those seated around the table, uniting us in love and joy. Even if one or more of the people at the table drive us crazy, even if being together stirs up old hurts, there is something powerful and healing about Thanksgiving.

Philip Yancey, an extraordinary Christian writer, says,

I have learned more about grace, forgiveness, diversity – and yes, original sin – from my family than from all the theology books I have read. Troublesome issues like divorce and homosexuality take on a different cast when you confront them not in a state legislature but at a family reunion.

*(Christianity Today, 5/20/96)*

And don't forget, Jesus boldly declared that his new people would be his new family. We belong to a family that transcends our biological family, a new creation gathered to love us and to be loved. This week, thank God for this congregation, this new family of women, men and children who love us and walk along life's journey with us. Each and all are gifts from God for whom to be thankful.

The point is: on Thursday (and every day of our lives), we should thank God for the people God has placed in our lives. Each enriches us and helps make us what God intends us to be.

The first year I made my Thanksgiving list I realized the debt of gratitude I owed my mother. Like all sons, I went through that period when we think it's necessary to declare independence from our mothers. I had to let her know I was superior to her. I was cruel, ungrateful, and to be honest, pretty snotty.

I remembered that she let me live in her body for nine months, a largely unpleasant experience for her. She gave me birth, an experience she's never let me forget was most painful! She took care of my every need when I was a child and put up with me as an adolescent brat. Through it all and through every day of my life, she has loved me unconditionally. She can't help it. She's my mother.

I wrote her a letter and thanked her for all that – for being my mom. She told me later that letter made her year and in ways made her life. Gratitude bears enormous power to do good.

I hope you can see the powerful lessons to be learned from a day of Thanksgiving and lives of gratitude. To put it another way, a grateful heart transforms grateful people.

The Old Testament Lesson commands gratitude. God tells the people of Israel that their new land is a land of plenty and its bounty will supply their needs and make them rich. When that happens, the text goes on, don't forget that all of it, everything we are and have, is a gift from God. The rich land on which they lived was not theirs. It belonged to God who let them live there. Even the ability to be successful, to grow rich, is a gift. Never forget; always be thankful.

Gratitude runs far deeper, however, than mere command and obedience. Scripture and life itself indicate that gratitude is powerfully creative. Gratitude opens our hearts and

enlarges our souls. Gratitude always creates a smile and a generous spirit. Thanksgiving offers a perspective that invariably builds character.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German theologian martyred by the Nazis, wrote to a friend in the last days of his imprisonment. His life of privilege and power was long gone, and his life itself was likely near its end. He wrote that he was quite grateful. He'd learned to be grateful for what he had, not what he did not have or no longer possessed. Gratitude is wonderfully transforming.

Ingratitude, on the other hand is invariably destructive. Some folks, it seems, even church folk, find it impossible to enjoy life as it is. They possess the creative capacity to criticize most everything. They have the gift of discouragement. They seem so committed to their discontent they are incapable of happiness. Life is a perpetual grimacing frown. And we all know the end results of that capacity: bitterness, hostility, and alienation.

The choice is ours. We can choose gratitude. We can choose ingratitude. That choice determines the course of our live and content of our character.

The Gospel Lesson puts it another way. Jesus teaches us that we should not be anxious about things we cannot control. Instead we should focus on larger issues, things that really count.

“What does it profit you if you gain the whole world but lose your soul,” he said. What if we fulfill all our dreams, maximize our potential, become everything we want to be, but in the process fail to love our God or love the people God placed in our lives?

Some things last forever, namely our souls and the people who are part of our lives. Thanksgiving is a reminder of that fact we all know but tend to forget. At the table on Thursday, look around and thank God for each one. Let's commit ourselves to larger hearts and deeper trust in the people at that table. Remember all of life -- from the food on the table to the people at the table -- all is a gift from God. It is grace.

Frederick Buechner describes God's grace this way:

Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth.

A good sleep is grace and so are good dreams. Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace. Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is grace.

A crucial eccentricity of the Christian faith is the assertion that people are saved by grace. There's nothing *you* have to do. There's nothing you *have* to do. There's nothing you *can* do.

The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but *are* because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you.

There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it.

Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too.

*(Wishful Thinking, 34)*

Yes, there's something about a grateful heart that is wonderfully transforming.

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