

## Thank-you-giving? November 30, 2008

It hardly seems possible that Thanksgiving is now behind us, and that we're starting into that part of the year that the church refers to as Advent—a time of preparation for the coming of the birth of Jesus. Even though the church considers this a special holy time, most of us get consumed with all the holiday activities that to us make up the Christmas season—things like shopping, food preparation, gift wrapping, decorating the house and more.

This year may be a bit different from recent Christmases, since the economy has so many people in a funk. According to the news media, most shoppers are going to spend less this year than in previous years, and many are trying to get more creative about how to make their dollars stretch farther than in the past. My guess is that some of us this morning are in that place, but you know?--In many ways, the current conditions in which we find ourselves may be serving a useful purpose, perhaps even a wake-up call—a summons to rethink our priorities, and to get back to the basics, and to what's most important, to what really counts in life.

Because of all that, we're going to be treating this holiday season a little differently, too. We're going to be dealing in general with the theme of gifts and giving, but hopefully, we can find a unique spin or slant on the notion of giving that might help us all reconsider what really matters this year.

This morning, you have probably noticed that our title is "Thank-You-Giving," and frankly, that's a dead give-away for what we're about. It seems to me that one of the least costly gifts we can ever give is to thank someone for something. While it may be cost-effective, I can assure you that to the recipient of the "thank you," the gift is priceless. So, let's think about what it really means for us to offer that "thank you" to someone.

I don't know about you, but I am not as good about expressing my thanks as I could be. In fact, I'm afraid that sometimes, I'm downright stingy with a word of thanks, I don't know why exactly, but I know that I often use the excuse that I'm busy or that I forgot and now it's too late. What I am going to try to do this season is to break that bad habit, and develop a better one—one of being generous in offering my thank-you to others.

Frankly, being able to offer thanks comes from a deep sense of gratitude and appreciation. It has to do with taking the time to drink in the gracious acts of kindness and love that are all around us, to value and honor them, and to let our gratitude spill over in expression of thanks-giving.

And it also has to do with being grateful for even the annoyances and distractions that sometimes seem to intrude on our lives. During World War II, Corrie Ten Boom and her sister had been harboring Jewish people in their home until the two of them were arrested and sent to a concentration camp. Ten Boom reported that

the barrack in which they found themselves was very crowded, and to add to that misery, it was infested with fleas.

As they turned to their Bibles for comfort and hope during that bleak time, they came upon a passage that encouraged them to thank God no matter what happens. Ten Boom's sister had a sort of revelation, and said to Corrie, "We have to thank God for the fleas!" Corrie was astounded, and responded that there was no way she could thank God for pests like fleas, but her sister insisted, and she finally relented. Every time they prayed or read their Bibles, they were sure to include a prayer of thanks-giving for fleas.

In the months that followed, they discovered that the guards were leaving their barrack relatively free, so much so that it actually became almost of place of refuge from the other atrocities that were occurring around them. Several months later, they learned that the guards seldom entered their barrack because of those pesky fleas! What had seemed like such an annoyance and caused so much discomfort actually turned out to be a blessing!

That's probably one of the toughest things we have to do—to thank God for the fleas in our lives. We all have them, don't we? We have family members that we are not very fond of, who tend to interfere and disrupt our lives. There may be a co-worker who is difficult to work with and who seems to make our work day more stressful than necessary. We could probably name all kinds of people or things that are the equivalent to fleas in the barracks, but that says to us that we probably need a shift of our thinking.

We need to consider how we can begin to say "thank you" for even the flea-like elements that seem to plague us, and ask God to help us find some good even in the worst of those flea-times. Those are the tough ones, but I bet we can do it, if we just set our minds to it. Maybe that's one gift we could give ourselves this holiday season.

Now about that thank-you-giving... Jacques Maritain wrote, "**Gratitude is the most exquisite form of courtesy,**" and indeed it is. After all, that's one of the things most of us learned when we were small children; when someone gave us something, our parents would admonish us with, "Now what do you say to Mrs. Jones?" We have been taught to say "thank you" from our very earliest days, and if we've lost the ability to do that, we probably need to focus on relearning it and getting it back.

Frankly, being able to say "thank you" stems from an inner sense of appreciation and gratitude. Centuries ago, Cicero said, "**Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others.**" It is the basic starting point for a life filled with blessings, with possibilities and hope. It is an underlying attitude toward life and all life brings us. It is the capacity to look at the world around us through eyes of appreciation, seeing the wonder of creation and the remarkable uniqueness and value of every individual.

It is really having the spirit that is so evident in today's Bible passage. This is the writer Paul, and he

begins almost every one of his letters to the people in the various churches with words of gratitude and appreciation. In our passage, he writes, “Every time we think of you, we thank God for you. Day and night you’re in our prayers as we call to mind your work of faith, your labor of love, and your patience of hope in following God....”

“Every time we think of you, we thank God for you.” That’s the kind of gratitude that filled Paul’s life to the point that he was thanking God nonstop for those who entered his thoughts. Wouldn’t that be a good idea for each of us? Just think about the number of times thoughts of people we care about flash through our mind, and now consider what it would mean if, with every thought, we breathed a word of thanks for that person, just because they live or have lived, and of the many ways their lives have enriched ours. That would be a good start toward filling our very being with a sense of appreciation and gratitude.

But I really don’t want to see it stop with thinking about the person and being grateful. I think we need to learn to express our gratitude better, and it’s not all that difficult, and it starts with the little things, the common, ordinary, everyday experiences, like offering with a wave of the hand when someone is kind enough to let us into the traffic flow. We can say thank you to the person who holds the door for us, or the one we’re talking to on the phone. We can begin by expressing our thanks for the multitude of little things for which we have cause to be grateful. Life offers us countless opportunities to use the words “thank you,” if we’re willing to look around us with more of a sense of appreciation.

One of the common courtesies that seems to have fallen from favor is that I think we might want to recapture, and that’s taking the time to write a note of thanks to someone for something he or she has said or done that we have noted and found reason to value. For instance, I’m guessing that we all have those persons in our lives that have made a difference for us in one way or another. It may have been a teacher or a coach, a parent, a supervisor, a friend—someone who has in some way influenced our lives for the good. What better Christmas gift could people like that receive than a letter of remembrance and thanks for the ways in which they touched our lives?

I’m certain we can all think of at least one person—either still living or no longer with us—who has made a difference, and today is a good time for us to begin to express our gratitude. You’ll find thank-you notes on your table, and I encourage you, right now, today, to pick up that note and begin to write a note of thanks. Sure, we can do it by email, too, but I think there’s something special about taking the time to do a handwritten note, putting a stamp on the envelope, and mailing it as a special Christmas greeting to someone who has been a gift to us, someone who has mentored us, inspired us, and helped us be more than we might otherwise have been.

I would be remiss if I didn’t express my thanks, and the thanks of all of us who are part of The Garden, to each one of you. We are grateful to you and for you—

that you are with us on Sundays and other times of the week, that so many of you have given so much of your time—especially in this difficult financial time to help us get through and continue to minister to the world around us, that so many of you have written checks to help us reduce and eliminate our financial shortfall, that you care. I am filled with gratitude for each and every one of you because you are an inspiration to me in both the big ways and small. You make my life better. Thank you.

Closing:

Melody Beattie has written these words: “Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend. Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow.”

A sense of gratitude fills and re-energizes our life, and thank-you-giving is the most precious gift we can give at Christmas. As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray each of us is ready and willing to say “thank you.”

Have a good Sunday and go in peace. Amen.