

Thanksgiving

Does anyone here think they know the relationship between this man and the first Canadian Thanksgiving? Was he or was he not mistaken for a turkey? No, the man is Sir Martin Frobisher and he may have had no connection at all to our celebration of Thanksgiving, but some people trace back this holiday to his third trip in search of the Northwest Passage, or, as historians argue today, his third trip in search of gold in the northern parts of what is now Canada. Here's the description from Wikipedia of the Thanksgiving service of 1578:

Frobisher ... held his Thanksgiving celebration not for harvest but in thanks for surviving the long journey from England through the perils of storms and icebergs. On his third and final voyage to the far north, Frobisher held a formal ceremony in Frobisher Bay in Baffin Island (present-day Nunavut) to give thanks to God and in a service ministered by the preacher Robert Wolfall they celebrated Communion.

There are other stories of the origins of Canadian Thanksgiving, none of them this early and any of them more likely to have started a tradition that was actually carried on from year to year. As far as I can ascertain, there were not regular visits to Baffin Island and the appropriate thanksgiving services for many decades after Frobisher's third visit.

But isn't it interesting that a man who had been a pirate, and who had now been commissioned and supported by Elizabeth I of England, would choose to give thanks to God for his safe passage through the storms and icebergs of the North Atlantic.

I want to look at some short passages from the Bible that tell us a lot about how important gratitude is for us and I'll start in the Garden of Eden. What do we know about this garden? We know that God planted it and that it contained beautiful trees that produced delicious fruit (Genesis 2:9). We know that at the center of the garden were two trees that had special significance; the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And we know that a river flowed through the garden, watering it and then dividing as it continued on. We know that God walked with the first man and the first woman in this garden that He had planted for them. What was missing? What did they lack? They didn't have any fast cars or pizza ovens, but they didn't know that they didn't have them. What they had was more than enough - delicious food to eat, a beautiful garden to live in, God's presence with them and they had each other. But the tempter came along and told Eve about something she didn't have - she didn't know the difference between good and evil; she only knew good. And suddenly, that wasn't enough. She felt she was missing something, she saw that the fruit of the forbidden tree was fresh and delicious and the thought that it would make her wise was just too much - she had to have some.

That's the kind of thing that happens too often to us. We are among the wealthiest people in the world. I remember once reading that if you had money in the bank and cash in your wallet you were in the top 8% of the world's wealthy - I don't think that's true any more. But at the end of 2006 there were 28.4 million slaves in the world whose

wealth was zero - no net worth at all. But do we feel blessed or do we feel envious of those who have a bit more? I'm not following the U.S. election campaign very closely, but even from a distance I get the sense that envy is a real factor in the debate. I hear phrases like, "everyone should get their fair share" and I wonder what that means? Or that there's some group called the 1% who have everything and they should be forced to give it up. Why? Why do we want what they have? We're already among the richest people in the world. The poorest of us have a TV set and a cell phone. Eve lost sight of gratitude, lost sight of all the goodness that surrounded her and began to focus on something she didn't have -- and it destroyed her. If we lose focus on what we have and become obsessed with what we don't, our jealousy, our envy, can destroy us, too.

A further illustration of this same point is found in Paul's letter to the Romans, the first chapter:

They knew God, but they wouldn't worship Him as God or even give Him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. The result was that their minds became dark and confused. Claiming to be wise, they became utter fools instead. And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people, or birds and animals and snakes.
(Romans 1:21-23)

The descent of humankind began, and continues, when we refuse to acknowledge God, refuse to worship Him, refuse to even give Him thanks. When we can give all the credit for our blessings to Mr. Blind Chance it feels a bit like taking all the credit ourselves. On the other hand, when we give all the credit for our blessings to God, and live in grateful response to Him, we are drawn to worship someone greater than ourselves ... and that lifts us up. That has the opposite effect to the things we see described in these verses in Romans.

But what about the person who says, "What have I got to be thankful for? What has God done for me that I should have to feel grateful about? Let's look at a quick list of things from the Bible, starting with some verses from the Old Testament.

I Chronicles 16:34:

*Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good
His faithful love endures forever*

What a great place to start. This is not thanking God for giving me a great job or a new phone or for helping me find my reading glasses - this is thanking Him for who He is. God is good and His faithful love endures forever. This could change somebody's whole life. There is a God, He is good, and He loves human beings, not just now and then, not just when we're doing well, but with a constant faithfulness, an unbreaking, enduring love.

Psalm 7:17:

*I will thank the LORD because He is just
I will sing praise to the Name of the LORD Most High*

One of the biggest challenges for people who question the authority of the Bible is this issue of justice. Can a God who is truly just condemn innocent children along with their evil parents? Can a God who is just, judge the most noble and sacrificial people and forgive some of the most wicked and self-righteous people? The answer, according to Scripture, is that God alone is capable of perfect justice. He knows what is in the heart of each person, what they think about His Son, what they value more highly than Him. He knows that none of us is worthy of His salvation, and yet He extends it to us. In the case of judging the world, we don't have a clue what we don't know - and that includes the past, present and future choices, motivations, and private thoughts of any other person. Having said all that, some things that are described in the Bible seem harsh -- mostly because we don't know what we don't know -- but there is a verse that helps me when I come across things that I just don't understand about God's justice. It occurs back in Genesis 18 when Abraham is discussing with God's messengers the coming judgment of Sodom. Abraham pleads with God to spare the city if a number of righteous people can be found in it. He says, "Far be it from You ... to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike ... Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" And the LORD, who has just said that He has chosen Abraham to teach his children to do what is right and just, will, of course, do the right thing. He grants Abraham's request all the way down to ten, saying that he would spare the city if He could find 10 righteous people there. And before he does destroy the city, He brings Abraham's nephew Lot and his family out to safety. "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right!"

Another verse now - Psalm 118:21:

*I will give You thanks, for You answered me
You have become my salvation*

Two more huge reasons for giving thanks: God answers our prayers and He is a God who saves. We don't always get the answers we want within the time frame we want, but I would suspect that everyone or nearly everyone in this room could point to multiple times when God has answered our prayers. Does this make it easier when we find ourselves still waiting, not hearing? Not much, perhaps, but having to wait for an answer isn't the same thing as saying that God doesn't have an answer.

The second big word in this verse is "salvation". The Psalmist says that God has become his salvation, that God is his rescuer, the one who saves him from calamity. We see the saving works of God throughout history and we see them also in our own lives. What a difference He makes in the lives of people who turn to Him in faith.

I'll end this Scripture portion with a catch-all phrase from the introduction to Psalm 105:

*Give thanks to the LORD, call on His name
Make known among the nations what He has done (105:1)*

Here the phrase is "what He has done". We give thanks to God for His actions throughout history, especially in our personal history. All that He has done, every way in which He has blessed us, it deserves our thanksgiving, our appreciation. In the Psalms we read about people coming into worship singing and dancing, praising God for His goodness. We read that people would bring offerings as a way of saying thank you to

God. In some places in the Bible you read of solemn ceremonies and in others of exuberant praise, but at the heart of it all is this spirit of thanksgiving.

The main point of my message today is exactly that: at the heart of how we live and how we respond to the various challenges we face is whether or not we can be thankful. Now, let's look at some stories.

When the late John Claypool lost his 10-year-old daughter to leukemia, he tried three different tracks for dealing with his loss. The first was to say, "Well, it was just God's will; I'll just have to accept it." But that didn't fit with what he knew God to be like and he couldn't believe that God willed 10-year-old girls to die of leukemia. So there wasn't any peace or satisfaction in just passing it off as God's will or God's plan. The second path was to try to find an intellectually satisfying answer to his daughter's death, but that didn't work either. It didn't make any sense, didn't serve any great purpose and there was no way to understand it. Finally, John walked the path of gratitude. He realized that life is a gift, that we are not entitled to it, and so any experience we have is pure gift and grace. He chose to be thankful for the ten good years they had together rather than become consumed with resentment for the years that he would never have with his daughter. It wasn't an easy path, but it was the only one that offered any help.

Many years ago, an elderly English pastor was famous for his pulpit prayers. He always found something to thank God for, even in the bad times. One stormy Sunday morning, when the circumstances in the community were especially difficult, when there seemed to be no end of bad news and when the pastor himself was going through some painful personal circumstances, he stepped forward to pray and people were thinking, "What can he possibly be thankful for on a morning like this?" The pastor began his prayer, "We thank you, Lord, that it is not always like this."

Maybe you've heard or read the story of the blind boy who was begging on the steps of a building with a hat beside his feet. He held up a sign which read, "I am blind; please help." There were only a few coins in the hat. Eventually, a man came walking by who not only put some coins in the hat but also took the sign, turned it around, and wrote some words. He put the sign back so that everyone who walked by would see the new words. Soon the hat began to fill up - a lot more people were giving money to the blind boy. That afternoon the man who had written on his sign came back to see how things were going. The boy recognized his footsteps and asked him, "Were you the one who changed my sign this morning? What did you write?" The man said, "I only said what you said, but in a different way. I wrote, "Today is a beautiful day, but I can't see it." What changed in the people who read the second sign and began to give? They saw the boy's circumstances from a different perspective. The second sign enabled them to be thankful that they were able to experience the beauty of the day and to have compassion for a boy who did not have that privilege.

Many of us will be familiar with the story of Robinson Crusoe, published in 1719 by Daniel Defoe. When Crusoe was shipwrecked and landed on the island, he drew two

columns in the sand. On the left, he analyzed the desperate straits he was in and on the right, the things he had to be thankful for.

Left column: I'm cast away on a desolate island

Right column: I'm still alive

Left column: I'm separated from the rest of humanity

Right column: I'm not starving

I have no clothes to wear, but, I don't need any

I have no means of defense, but I don't feel threatened

I have no one to talk to, but, the wrecked ship is close at hand and I can get out of it all the things necessary for my basic needs.

His conclusion: there is no condition in the world that is so miserable that a person could not find something to be grateful for.

What do all these stories have in common? They all illustrate, in some way, how our attitudes influence our lives. There is a growing trend in our society towards entitlement, the idea that the world owes me something, an equal share in the vast resources of my country, or at least an ever-increasing share in the capital earned by those who have worked hard or otherwise 'done well' in life. As this idea of entitlement takes over, and it is doing so especially among this current generation of young adults -- present company excepted, of course -- the idea of being grateful, of giving thanks, is being crowded out. Why say "thank you" for things you are supposed to be getting? Why express gratitude when you had it coming anyway? I say all that just to highlight the fact that being thankful is a choice. We've probably all known people who don't seem to appreciate things that have been done for them. And we've all known people who are genuinely grateful and express it easily. But the choice we make, whether to be thankful or to feel entitled, has consequences.

What are the consequences for the person who chooses thankfulness?

1. She knows her Creator better. Because she chooses to honor Him with her thanksgiving, she is walking in truth, is recognizing His goodness and grace to her and is in the appropriate place to hear from Him, to receive from Him, and to grow in Him. The person who chooses ingratitude will not, cannot, be in that place of growing depth in their walk with God.
2. He has a helpful perspective on whatever challenges he is facing. Have you noticed how unhelpful it is to express your discontent or frustration with your lot in life? Have you noticed how few people want to hear what you're unhappy about, how someone could have treated you better, or what the world owes you that you're not getting? It's not that people don't care so much as it's that we're all in the same boat. We all have experienced disappointment and we've all been treated poorly by someone who should have treated us better. So when you express your frustration, the most likely response you'll get from your listener is, "Oh, don't I know it. That's what happened to me, too -- only worse!" The grateful person, on the other hand, finds help from having a different view of the world. He can look on the 'bright side', so to speak, and, like Robinson Crusoe or John Claypool, or so many others who have made that

choice, he finds he is strengthened to face his challenge with more grace and greater resolve.

3. She will be more emotionally healthy and she will be able to be a better friend to others. The complainer is self-focused and tends to alienate people. The thankful person is focused outward and tends to draw people to herself. Have you noticed how positive people are a magnet, how easy they are to be around? The attitude of gratitude changes us to become more accepting of others, more humble in our relationships and a better friend - one others want to be with.
4. Choosing gratitude gives hope to the people in your life. If you have hope, if you can see blessing and potential and God at work, then you are helping others to see those things as well. There is nothing more defeating than trying to help someone who has no hope. The person who is thankful for what life has brought this far is a person who has a reason to be hopeful for what lies ahead -- and that should describe a person who knows God, a person who could write the psalms that we looked at earlier, a person who could find blessings in having 10 years with his daughter instead of being depressed at not having the hoped-for years ahead. That's a sign of genuine faith, because the person of faith is always a person of hope. This interplay between thankful-ness, faith and hope is real, it's practical and it leads to much better things in the future. Let me encourage you, as best I can today, to be grateful people, to be thankful both for what God has given you and for what the people of God have brought into your life. May your gratitude be visible to everyone around you and may it lead you into profound healing for disappointments in your past and into deep joy in all that the future brings you.