

“A History of Giving Thanks”

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Psalm 40:1-3, 13-15

This time of year, there is always a great deal of conversation about thankfulness and about the history of thanksgiving. Emails are forwarded around that talk about the pilgrims and how our traditions today derive from their lives. School children make pilgrim hats and talk about the formation of that first meal where pilgrims sat together and ate with Native Americans, giving thanks for the cooperation and food sharing that allowed them to make it through a difficult time. While these history lessons and popular myths are fun to share and can be good teaching tools, these stories about why we should give thanks as Americans are short sided – especially for those of us in this country who profess a belief in God. Let me elaborate for just a minute on this short sidedness...

Unfortunately, on this holiday when our country remembers one group of people getting it right and caring for another group of people, we see so many people and groups of people doing silly things that are wasteful and harmful. There are all of the stories of people standing in line for hours and even at times lashing out in violence over new video game consoles that we have heard over the last week – imagine how these stories must sound to people who aren't able to provide any gifts or let alone new clothes for their families this Christmas. And there are stories like the news story that ran out of Naperville on Thursday morning. A contest was held where each contestant had a twelve pound turkey placed in front of them and twelve minutes to eat as much as they could. The winner of this contest consumed nearly 5 pounds of turkey. How does one hear this

news story if they are going to be going hungry that day and aren't able to provide food for themselves or for their family?

The irony of our American Thanksgiving celebration is overwhelming for me. This holiday is, at least in theory, designed to celebrate cooperation, protection, and food sharing that one group shared with another when they were in need. And while the Thanksgiving holiday is a perfect opportunity to take a few hours or a day out of our busy routines to find ways to provide protection, shelter, or food to persons in need, it has become a holiday that is more about consumption – both of food and stuff – than it is about the history that helped shape and form it as a holiday.

This morning I want to spend some time talking about the history of thanksgiving, or of giving thanks, but not the history of our American holiday. I want to talk today about our history of giving thanks as Christians – as people of faith who are a part of the long tradition and long line of people who have a strong and rich tradition of giving thanks.

Even outside of our extreme habits of consumption our celebrations of Thanksgiving have in many ways become superficial. Many individuals and families barely scratch the surface of or acknowledge the depths of the things that they have to be thankful for. Our rich tradition of giving thanks as people of faith runs counter to this often shallow simplicity. In his recent book, “One Step Closer; Why U2 matters to those seeking God” author Christian Scharen writes the following about the psalms, “The brilliance of the psalms is that they speak of our whole existence before God. Psalms are earthy and therefore don't hurry past the reality of human experience. Rather, they dwell deeply in the midst of life, taking seriously the raw energy of human agony and ecstasy.”

The psalms are songs, written by ancient Hebrew people to be sung to God in worship. They are songs of faith that articulate despair and hope, isolation and longing, need and provision. They are songs that, in all of their richness and complexity, address the themes of thankfulness and gratitude in real and profound ways. Scholars divide the 150 psalms found in the Hebrew Scriptures into three main categories: Psalms of Praise, Psalms of Thanksgiving, and Psalms of Lament.

Psalms of Praise are songs that sing of God's goodness in very general and inclusive ways. They often recount God's action in the creation of the world and in the liberation of the Israelites from captivity, they sing praises to God for all that God is and does. Psalm 100, that was adapted for our call to worship this morning, is a great example of a Psalm of Praise. It reads, "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing. Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations."

Psalms of Thanksgiving are songs that were sung to give God thanks for very specific acts in the lives of the individual or the community. They were sung when people were healed from a disease or they were sung when someone had been reunited with a lost friend or relative. They often recounted the broader themes of faith, but they give thanks specifically for God's activity in a particular way. Psalm 116 is a beautiful psalm of Thanksgiving, the first six verses speaking of God's love and deliverance, "I love God because he listened to me, listened as I begged for mercy. He listened so

intently as I laid out my case before him. Death stared me in the face, hell was hard on my heels. Up against it, I didn't know which way to turn; then I called out to God for help: "Please, God!" I cried out. "Save my life!" God is gracious—it is he who makes things right, our most compassionate God. God takes the side of the helpless; when I was at the end of my rope, he saved me.”

Psalms of Lament are songs that are often of despair and complaint. They were written as cries to God for help in and deliverance from the midst of difficult situations. They spoke from what Scharen referred to as those real and earthy places of life. Even though these songs were songs of complaint, they often began with a recounting of and giving thanks for things that God had done in the past. They are, in many ways cries of, God we know that you have helped us or our people in the past, why won't you come and deliver us from this junk we find ourselves in now. The first 8 verses of Psalm 22 contain great words of lament, “God, God...my God! Why did you dump me miles from nowhere? Doubled up with pain, I call to God all the day long. No answer. Nothing. I keep at it all night, tossing and turning. And you! Are you indifferent, above it all, leaning back on the cushions of Israel's praise? We know you were there for our parents: they cried for your help and you gave it; they trusted and lived a good life. And here I am, a nothing—an earthworm, something to step on, to squash. Everyone pokes fun at me; they make faces at me, they shake their heads: ‘Let's see how God handles this one; since God likes him so much, let him help him!’”

While a majority of the 150 Psalms are usually categorized into one of these three categories – praise, thanksgiving, or lament – there are some that fit equally well into two of the three categories – one of these is Psalm 40, both a psalm of lament and a psalm of

thanksgiving. The psalmist's words in the first three verses speak thanks to God for God's action in the past. "I waited and waited and waited for GOD. At last he looked; finally he listened. He lifted me out of the ditch, pulled me from deep mud. He stood me up on a solid rock to make sure I wouldn't slip. He taught me how to sing the latest God-song, a praise-song to our God. More and more people are seeing this: they enter the mystery, abandoning themselves to GOD." However, while acknowledging this thankfulness, the Psalmist also cries out in verses 13-15, "Soften up, GOD, and intervene; hurry and get me some help, So those who are trying to kidnap my soul will be embarrassed and lose face, So anyone who gets a kick out of making me miserable will be heckled and disgraced, So those who pray for my ruin will be booed and jeered without mercy."

One of the beautiful things about the psalms is their ability to speak to people from generation to generation. Written hundreds of years before his time, Jesus quoted the psalms in a variety of ways in his ministry. The gospels even record Jesus quoting from a psalm of lament as he hung from the cross. Written thousands of years ago these psalms continue to speak to people today as they are used in prayers, in movies, in books, and even in songs.

One of the ways that the words and thoughts of a psalmist have been immortalized in contemporary music is through the work of U2. On their 1983 "War" album U2 recorded a song titled simply "40." The song is based on Psalm 40 and walks that delicate balance between thanksgiving and lament. The song isn't lengthy and doesn't contain any complex lyrics, but it begins with a simple statement of thanksgiving, "I waited patiently for the lord, He inclined and heard my cry." And it ends with a

hauntingly simple refrain, “I will sing, sing a new song. How long to sing this song?” How long to sing this song? On their tours – especially through the mid-to-late 80’s, U2 closed many of their shows with “40” and left audiences singing this refrain over and over again at the end of their shows. Tens of thousands of people at a rock concert lifting up the words of the psalmist in song, many of them probably not even aware of the word’s origins.

The power of the psalms is not simply that people have been able to take their words from generation to generation and recreate them in new and meaningful ways. The power of the psalms is their universal themes that have continued to speak to people from generation to generation. As we look at these themes of praise, of thanksgiving, and of lament, there is a greater theme that emerges in the psalms – balance. And this is the key that I think makes the psalms so timeless.

The balance that is illustrated so beautifully by the psalms is a balance between right and responsibility. The psalms of lament teach us that we have a right to cry out to God in anger. They teach us that it is ok to do this, that we have a right to do it, and they illustrate for us how to do it in faithful and real ways. We have this right to cry out to God in lament, to question God, to wrestle with God because God is God of all and is big enough to take our wrestlings, our questions, and our doubts. For generations and generations now people of faith from the Israelites, to Jesus, to us today, have had the right to cry out to God when life has been hard and when things haven’t gone as hoped for or planned.

At the same time though, we have a responsibility as people of faith to thank God for all of life, to understand that all that we have comes from God and that all of God’s

gifts for us are to be appreciated and taken care of. We have a responsibility then to give thanks to God with all of our hearts, souls, minds, and strength. We have a responsibility to be thankful for all that God has given to us and at the same time we have a responsibility to share those gifts with others by practicing good stewardship.

Our relationship with God gives us rights and responsibilities both. At their best then our lives are to be lived in balance – balance between thanksgiving and lament – balance between right and responsibility. God is God of all and so we can cry out when we hurt, when we worry, when we wonder why things are going the way they are and where God is in the middle of it all. At the same time we must always remember then to give thanks to God for all that is good, for the beauty of the world that surrounds us, for the blessings that we have in our lives.

Next week is the first Sunday of Advent, an opportunity for us to prepare for the coming of Christ. If you haven't already begun making your Christmas plans and doing your Christmas shopping I'm sure that you soon will. However, don't forget to take the needed time during this coming season of Advent to prepare for what the season is all about, getting our hearts, our minds, and our lives in balance as we prepare for the coming of Christ into the world and into our lives.