11-20-16 Thanksgiving Sunday Rev. Amy Haines

Psalm 100, \*Deuteronomy 26:1-11 Remember and Give Thanks

On my mother’s side of the family, Thanksgiving is a holiday filled with tradition. The meal has changed little from Grandma’s kitchen to my sister’s kitchen. There is plenty of turkey and homemade stuffing, noodles and mashed potatoes, candied yams and cranberry sauce, rolls and pumpkin pie. The parade is on TV in the morning; the football game is shown in the afternoon.

There is always a holiday candle on the table, lit, and my sister Jen will end the meal playing with the wax. Once we wake from our naps, games are played and Christmas lists created. Supper usually consists of cookies and pie, cold turkey and cranberries. It is a day of food and laughter, family and fun, but underlying it all is an attitude of thanksgiving to God.

Thanksgiving is about more than football, feasts and family gatherings. Authentic thanksgiving

—on the fourth Thursday of November or any day of the year—authentic thanksgiving is about remembering, responding and rejoicing. Authentic thanksgiving is all about worship, giving thanks for what God has done, who God is, and how God will continue to be with us.

When our Israelite faith ancestors had settled in the promised land of Canaan, they were called to gather for what I like to think of as the first thanksgiving feast. They gathered for a harvest festival to remember, respond and rejoice, to thank God for his presence in their past, their present and their future.

That same thanksgiving attitude was evident with the early American pilgrims at Plymouth, who gathered for a harvest festival that remembered where they came from, responded to their survival with worship and a feast, and rejoiced with their new friends that helped them survive.

Listen to Plymouth Colony Governor William Bradford’s thanksgiving proclamation:

…“Inasmuch as the great Father has given us this year an abundant harvest of Indian corn, wheat, beans, squashes, and garden vegetables, and has made the forests to abound with game and the sea with fish and clams, and inasmuch as He has protected us from the ravages of the savages, has spared us from pestilence and disease, has granted us freedom to worship God

according to the dictates of our own conscience; now, I, your magistrate, do proclaim that all ye Pilgrims, with your wives and little ones, do gather at ye meeting house, on ye hill, between the hours of 9 and 12 in the day time, on Thursday, November ye 29th of the year of our Lord one thousand six hundred and twenty-three, and the third year since ye Pilgrims landed on ye Pilgrim Rock, there to listen to ye pastor, and render thanksgiving to ye Almighty God for all His blessings.” --Illustrations Unlimited, p.264

This morning our worship focuses on giving thanks. This morning we are called to follow in the footsteps of our ancestors in giving authentic thanks to God.

So this morning we are reminded that our thanksgiving begins in remembering.

The Israelite harvest festival began with remembering who they were and who God was and what God did to save God’s people. As they brought their first fruits as an offering of worship,

the Israelites were instructed to say,

…“ A wandering Aramean was my father, he went down to Egypt and sojourned there,

he and just a handful of his brothers at first, but soon they became a great nation, mighty and many. The Egyptians abused and battered us, in a cruel and savage slavery. We cried out to God, the God-of-Our-Fathers: He listened to our voice, he saw our destitution, our trouble, our cruel plight. And God took us out of Egypt

 with his strong hand and long arm, terrible and great, with signs and miracle-wonders.

 And he brought us to this place, gave us this land flowing with milk and honey.

 So here I am. I've brought the first fruits of what I've grown on this ground you gave

 me, O God.” (v. 5-10)

This litany reminded them that their ancestor was an immigrant without a home, claimed as God’s beloved, whose descendants became a great nation. These ancestors were treated harshly in Egypt but God heard their cries for freedom and justice and delivered them and brought them finally to the land of promise. This harvest festival and first fruit offering was their way to say thanks to God for claiming them, for saving them, for settling them and for providing for them.

It was a way to say thanks not only for God’s faithfulness in the past, but also for God’s presence in the present. While the offerings were given individually, they were given as part of their communal worship, reminding them that God saved them as a people, as a community, as God’s beloved.

Our American thanksgiving feast is our way as a nation of immigrants to remember how we got here and how God provided for those who came to this country seeking religious freedom. To be a Pilgrim meant one was a part of a caring community. The colonists willingly shared all they had. They rationed their corn kernels. They held property in common. While the pilgrims suffered many hardships along the way, they never ceased together to give thanks to God for giving them a new land in which to worship God freely.

When we forget where we’ve come from, when we forget the men and women who lived and died and shared the faith before us, when we forget what God has done in the midst of our lives and in our communities, then our focus moves from remembering to bragging, from giving thanks to God to giving thanks for our own abilities.

The flip side of forgetting who and whose we are is that when we grumble, we grumble about all we don’t have, forgetting all that we do have, however little or much that may be.

.. If you woke up this morning with more health than illness,

 you are more blessed than the million who will not survive the week.

 If you have food in your refrigerator, clothes on your back,

 a roof over your head and a place to sleep, you are richer than 75% of this world.

 If you have money in the bank, in your wallet, and spare change somewhere

 in a dish, you are among the top 8% of the world’s wealthy.

 If you have had an education and know how to read,

 then you are more blessed that over two billion people in the world

 who cannot read anything at all.

 If you own just one Bible, you are abundantly blessed.

 One-third of the world does not have access to even one.

 If you attend a church meeting without fear of harassment, arrest, torture,

 or death, you are more blessed that almost three billion people in the world.

 If your parents are still married and alive, you are very rare,

 even here in North America. Celebrate every anniversary.

 If you can hold someone's hand, hug them or even touch them on the shoulder,

 you are blessed because you can offer God's comforting touch.

 If you prayed yesterday and today, you are in the minority

 because you believe in God's willingness to hear and answer prayer.

 --combined from David Watters.10-05 sermoncentral.com

 and Richard Fairchild spirit-net.ca “Stone Soup”

Give thanks for what you have as an individual, or as extended family. Yet never forget that you are also part of a community of faith that is called together to give thanks.

Today, as we give thanks for the blessings in our lives, we are also called to remember and give thanks for the greatest blessing of all—God’s saving, eternal, abundant love for us shown throughout our faith history but especially through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Without Jesus’ life, we would not have the example of God’s kingdom ways of love and justice.

Without Jesus’ death, our sins would block us from a true relationship with Almighty God.

Without Jesus’ resurrection, we would have no hope for a life beyond this one. Jesus died so that we may live, and there is nothing greater about which to be thankful than Christ’s love for each and every one of us. As we remember God’s mighty acts of salvation from the time of the early Israelites through our lives today, we are called to be grateful for our stories of faith that fit within THE story of faith. We are called to give thanks for God’s actions long ago as well as Christ’s actions within our own lives.

Authentic thanksgiving begins in remembering. Our remembering then leads to responding.

God does not call us to just recite our faith history, say “thank you God,” and then go on about our daily business. God wants us to remember and then respond in faith and action to the history of God’s faithfulness. God wants us to respond to his mercy and grace with acts of gratitude and with worship.

..The first settlers in America landed in Massachusetts in the middle of winter without provisions, without shelter and that took a toll. Within one month 10 out of the 17 fathers and husbands who were on the Mayflower died. Within a couple months only four of the mothers and wives were alive out of the first 17 couples. By Easter almost half of the pilgrims had died.

Yet in 1623 the survivors looked back, remembered and responded in celebration and worship, giving thanks to God.

On another continent about 25 years later there was a Lutheran pastor named Martin Rinkart.

He lived in the walled city of Eilenberg in Saxony during the siege of the Thirty Years War.

Eilenberg was surrounded and the people within suffered from the plague and from starvation, until the pastors in town were burying 12 people a day. Pretty soon the pastors themselves started to die and Martin Rinkart became the only pastor left. He buried over 5,000 people in one year, conducting 40-50 funerals a day, including his own wife. When the war ended in 1648 he sat down, and penned these incredible words of gratitude in response to God’s faithfulness:

Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices,

Who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices;

Who from our mothers’ arms has blessed us on our way

With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

 —Deb Kielsmeier, “Thanksgiving,” 11-25-04,

 christpresbyterian.com in Homiletics 11-20-05

..During a clergy meeting in 1929, during the Great Depression, the subject of Thanksgiving Sunday’s sermon was brought up. One pastor suggested that they should just touch lightly on Thanksgiving that year because of the fall of the stock market, the long bread lines, and so many people out of work. However, another pastor reminded them that they were still the recipient of great spiritual blessings and that eventually God would bring about a financial recovery. He said that they needed to focus more on gratitude than ever before because their spiritual blessings were growing through their physical adversity. --Bob Allred, bobssermons.com

We don’t know what tomorrow will bring. There is a lot of uncertainty about 2017. Yet we, too, need to give thanks for our spiritual blessings no matter what life throws at us.

For the Israelites long ago God was not pleased merely with a recitation of their history in and out of Egypt. God called for his people to respond to such a history of grace by offering their first fruits at the altar of the Lord, recognizing that in the end, all they had to rely on was the grace and mercy of God. Without God they would not have the land, they would not have the crops, they would not have their freedom, they would not have their faith.

Last Sunday during Stewardship Sunday, we were reminded that God does not ask us to give to pay the church’s bills, but asks us to give as a faith response to God’s grace in our lives. We, too, are asked to give our first fruits of money, time, and talent in response to remembering God’s presence, providence and protection in our lives.

Yet how many of us struggle to give our first fruits to the Lord?

How many of us struggle to give God our best rather than what’s left?

How many of us struggle to show gratitude to God in a tangible response of faith?

.. .. Paul Tillich, a modern day theologian, once said:

"The reason most of us do not respond to ’thank you’ or do not say ’thank you’ is because we instinctively realize that it makes us somehow dependent on that person. If I thank you, I am saying that I am dependent on you, and I am publicly affirming it before God and people.

Gratitude is an action that has its roots in grace, the free undeserved love-action of God. When we are truly grateful, we become starkly aware that we are wholly dependent for everything upon God and upon our fellow human beings who are made in His image. When we are truly grateful, we recognize that God has favored us, whether we deserve favoring or not."

 -- Tim Zingale sermoncentral.com “First Fruits” 11-01

Pastor Rick Warren from Saddleback Church in California reminds us that if we are to grow spiritually, we need to respond to God’s grace by giving our first fruits in many ways. He says,

..We need to give the first part of our day in meditation to God.

We need to give the first part of our week in worship to God.

We need to give the first part of our income to God.

We need to give the first part of our social life to fellowship with other Christians.

Each of these four kinds of giving keeps our mental compass focused in God’s direction.

Remove any one of them and spiritual growth slows.”

--Rick Warren, *Discovering Spiritual Maturity* audiotapes,

quoted in New Consecration Sunday, p.54

Authentic thanksgiving begins in remembering God’s grace. Remembering then leads to responding in gratitude by offering God our first fruits of time and money, talents and worship.

Our responding, then, leads to rejoicing! When we respond in faith, we cannot help but celebrate!

Isn’t that what Thanksgiving is really all about—a time to celebrate, a time to give thanks, a time to rejoice!

When the Israelites had recited their faith history and offered their first fruits to the Lord, they were then called to come together in a feast of the harvest, sharing the bounty of their table

not only with one another but also with the priests and the foreigners among them, inviting the nomad and the widow, the poor and the outcast, the religious leaders and the immigrant workers all to celebrate together! Friends, after remembering and responding, it was then time to party!

As they had been blessed, they were called to be a blessing to others.

As we have been blessed, we are called to be a blessing to others.

..Henry J.M. Nouwen once suggested that the purest, simplest holiday may be Thanksgiving.

…Gratefulness is the very heart of prayer, and so to truly observe Thanksgiving is to engage in fervent prayer. -- Homileticsonline.com 11-23-00

True gratitude is not simply a list of blessings counted, recalling all of the good things in life.

True gratitude is presenting our entire selves to God and saying thanks even in the midst of pain, loss and struggle.

How are we remembering—responding—and rejoicing this week to God’s steadfast love, eternal promises and unending faithfulness to all generations?

How are we remembering—responding—and rejoicing this week in a way that is grounded in God, reflective of our faith, and evidence of God’s good news that needs to be shared with others?

Years ago when I lived in Deshler, Ohio, I was impressed with a family who advertised a free Thanksgiving meal to anyone who wished to come. The advertisement in part reads,

..“In light of the tough economic times, a free meal on Thanksgiving Day will be sponsored for families in the community who are feeling the crunch, who have nowhere to go for the holidays, or who would just like to fellowship with other members of the community.”

--Deshler Flag 11-18-10

I found out later the family included our neighbors, and they rented out a local church hall to share this free Thanksgiving meal. This family had also known hard times. They, too, could look back and remember how God was with them in the hard times, and then wanted to respond in gratitude by sharing with any in the community who wished to join them.

Thanksgiving is about more than football, feasts and family gatherings. As you celebrate this week, may you take a moment to say remember and say thanks for God’s faithfulness in your life.

Authentic thanksgiving is about remembering, responding and rejoicing to what God has done, who God is, and how God will continue to be with us.

May it be so in our lives, in our worship, and in our celebrations this week and every day of the year.

Let us pray.