

11.26.2015 Thanksgiving Day

A sermon by: The Rev. Mr. Christopher Smith
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"Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be always acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer." (Psalm 19:14)

One evening, after getting a day's rest in Sacramento, I decided to stop in at a local sandwich shop to grab a bite to eat before starting the drive home. As I walked in the door and headed toward the counter to place my order, a man sitting in a booth by himself asked me for some money to buy a sandwich. My initial reaction was a quick, "Sorry, I can't today"; but as I stood there watching them make this foot-long masterpiece covered with melting cheese and fresh vegetables, conviction began to get in the way of my appetite. This was much more than I needed, and by the time the sandwich was cut in half and wrapped up, I'd decided half a sandwich sounded just right; and there was no question about what to do with the other half.

The booth this man was sitting in was connected to another in such a way that he was actually facing the opposite booth – looking directly at whoever decided to sit there. At first glance, it seemed like providence! This would allow an opportunity not only to share a sandwich, but to sit down next to him and talk – to share a meal. I approached the booth with confidence, secure in the knowledge that God had been working on this plan for hours – maybe even days! I sat down, smiling happily because I knew I was about to do the right thing and said, "Hey, I got you a sandwich." To which he replies, "Is it turkey?" I said, "No, it's chicken." To which he replies, "Is it turkey?!" I said, "No, it's chicken!"

At this point I'm sitting down, right next to him, still smiling – I think. He looks at the sandwich, then at me, and then literally (no exaggeration!)

without saying another word, turned his nose up at my offer of chicken, instead of turkey. I was speechless. In my mind, this reaction wasn't even in the realm of possibility. What was I to do? Do I get up and leave? More importantly – if I do – am I allowed to take my sandwich with me? In this imperfect world we all have choices to make. So, right or wrong, I remained seated and – while he watched – ate both halves of my sandwich. It was the most awkward meal I have ever eaten.

Since that day, I've reflected many times on that experience – reliving the awkward silence – and with great regret wondered: How many times have I acted the same way with God? How many times has He tried to bless me, only to have me turn up my nose because His gift wasn't exactly what I had in mind?

The culture of ingratitude that we experience every day isn't new to us, and it's not new to God either. People have been grumbling, complaining, and turning up their noses at His generosity since time began. Think about Adam, God gave him life and placed him – under His loving protection – in a beautiful garden that God Himself had planted. God created, for Adam, from Adam, the perfect companion – Eve. She was bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh (Genesis 3:23). God said (Genesis 2:16-17), “Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it...” In allowing them to eat from every tree but one, God apparently wasn't generous enough, for we know how the story goes. Then, when caught in his trespass, Adam takes his ingratitude to the next level, and blames the whole situation on God. He said (Genesis 3:12), “The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree...” In other words, “This is your fault God!”

If we fast forward to the time of Moses and the Israelites, we see more of the same unthankful attitude. Through many signs and wonders (Exodus 7:3) God revealed Himself to His chosen people and set them free from brutal slavery under the Egyptians, but instead of thankfulness, God is met at every turn with murmuring and complaining. The people witnessed these miracles first-hand, but it wasn't enough. While God led them, at every turn they feared for their lives, thought they would be left to starve, or die of

thirst. (Exodus 14:11, 16:3, 17:3)

Fast forward again... In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus speaks to people that are still anxious about tomorrow; He says to them, “Be not anxious for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than food, and the body than raiment?” He tells them, “Behold the fowls of the air... Consider the lilies of the field... your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”

Where God guides, He provides. As we seek His kingdom and His righteousness, His eternal promise is to provide “every good gift and every perfect gift”. (James 1:17) The promise is not that this life will be easy, it isn't. We struggle – like Adam – to resist the temptation of that “one thing” God commands us not to touch; like the nation of Israel, we see our enemies – we witness terror – and we fear for our lives; and, just as it was in Jesus' day, poverty inclines the hearts of so many of God's children to worry about the source of their next meal.

In the midst of all this – on this Thanksgiving Day, we hear the word of God spoken through St. Paul: “In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.” (1 Thessalonians 5:18) God does not always set in front of us exactly what we want, but if we seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; we know that even if the path isn't easy, it is His will – and we should be thankful.

A couple of weeks ago we talked about Matthew's account of Jesus' disciples being caught in a raging storm. You may remember that at one point this group of grown men – mostly fisherman – who had no doubt spent most of their lives on the sea, were so terrified by their circumstance that they “cried out for fear”. I believe we can say – without a doubt – none of them wanted to be there at that moment, but it was “the will of God in Christ Jesus” that they were there. We know that's true because the Scripture says – at the beginning of this story – that (Matthew 14:22) “Jesus constrained His disciples to get into a ship...” Other translations say

that Jesus “insisted”, “compelled”, or “made” His disciples get into the ship.

Jesus knew that soon His disciples would be in the midst of a raging storm, terrified, crying out for fear. He put them there because He also knew... that is where they would find Him. He made them get into that boat and enter the storm – so that He could reveal Himself to them. After they witnessed Him “walking on the sea”, after they saw Him take Peter by the hand, those who were in the ship came and worshipped Him, saying, “Truly You are the Son of God.” (Matthew 14:33) When they cried out for fear, none of them wanted to be there, but which one of them would have chosen to miss that moment!

God’s blessings are not always the easy path. His blessings are not always exactly what we would order, but “in everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you”. When we choose ingratitude, when we choose to turn up our noses at “every good gift and every perfect gift” placed before us, we miss the opportunity for God to reveal Himself to us. When the disciples are all boarding the ship, don’t be the one standing on the shore saying, “I don’t know Jesus, this isn’t exactly what I had in mind. It smells like rain. I think I’ll stay here.” In trying to dodge the storm, you may just miss the opportunity to see the Son of God.

In a world where ingratitude is so common, we are called to be thankful “in everything”. As Christians we know that God’s greatest gift, His greatest blessing; came at the highest price – through indescribable suffering. With that in mind, let us use the time He has given us this Thanksgiving Day to consider the Cross, to reflect on His time there, and be thankful “in everything”.

"To the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now