

The True Story of Thanksgiving
St. Mark's & St. James UCC ~ November 25, 2020
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It is traditional, without a doubt, on Thanksgiving Day to tell and retell the story of the Pilgrims and the Indians and to talk about the harsh first winter they faced in the New World.

Some will tell the story with the children dressing up as Pilgrims in black hats, long white socks and buckled shoes, and as Indians;

their coming together as the Indians show the Pilgrims how to plant their corn or to hunt turkey and deer.

The Pilgrims are thankful for these people helping them to survive and they share a grand feast together – a festival of thanksgiving.

But for Christians, the deepest roots of our thanksgiving goes back to the Old World;
Long before the Pilgrims, to a story as old as creation.

It is a story that spans time ~ coming from the past and into the present giving meaning to our lives and continuing far into the future giving hope to those to come. You could call it

the true story of thanksgiving or

the Christian gospel or

you could call it as I do, the Good News.

While it is often told from a lens of undervalued virtue known as gratitude, it opens for us biblical passages – part of the story – we might otherwise discard or give less credence to.

Here is the true story of thanksgiving in 4 parts.

Created for Thanksgiving.

Consider these words: *“God created man and woman for gratitude. They (and we) exist to appreciate God.”*

First, God created humanity for gratitude. The prime existence of humanity is to appreciate God. God created us to honor him by giving thanks. We both appreciate who God is and how God acts for us and on our behalf – creating us, sustaining our lives, even and especially giving us a way to return to God's good grace.

In Romans 1, the apostle Paul tells what has gone wrong with the world. Although the people knew God, they did not honor God, nor give thanks to God. Instead their thinking in terms of God had turned vain, and their hearts were darkened and hardened.

Part of what the first man and first woman were created to do was to honor God by being thankful. And part of why we exist is to honor God by being thankful – and there are many biblical commands that call us to gratitude.

If humanity, from Adam and Eve to the following generations, were created to appreciate God how is it we have drifted away from that creational-understanding? When reading Romans 1 we can see that ingratitude was always lurking and close by.

Fallen from Thanksgiving.

Second, we have failed in appreciating God as we should. Ann Vaskamp, in her book on gratitude, gives us this memorable illustration to the failure of the first man and woman – and the devil before them – to experience and express gratitude as God gave to us.

Ann said, “From all of our beginnings, we keep reliving the Garden Story.”

Satan wanted more power, more glory, and a place in all of creation that rivaled or bettered that of God. In essence Satan is an ingrate – ungrateful for all God had given unto him. He wanted more.

Satan lashed out – sinking his venom into the heart of Eden and taking woman and man with him. Satan’s sin becomes the first sin against humanity: the sin of ingratitude. Adam and Eve become painfully aware of their own ingratitude and lash out by disobeying God.

In many ways, the catalyst of sin is just that. Ingratitude. Un-thankfulness.

Our fall from God’s grace centers around that we are not satisfied in God and in what God gives. We hunger for something more, something other, something we don’t have but feel it is our right to have. While Satan spawned un-thankfulness in Adam and Eve, they passed it along to all of us.

For many we fail to be thankful like we should, but we also fail to get the balance between physical and spiritual right. Let’s call these obstacles to our gratitude of God:

Hyperphysicality and hyperspirituality.

Hyperphysicality is the desire for material things to the exclusion of a spiritual balance. In other words: we want the gold and glitter of the things around us even if our relationship with God suffers. So, I’ll work 7-days a week, skip going to church, stop praying or reading the bible, say no to mission opportunities because material things have a stronger pull.

And we find ourselves thankful for the things we are accumulating here and now; and we don’t care about the eternal implications.

Hyperspirituality is just as dangerous when we mute God's physical goodness to us out of fear that appreciation for a physical gift, a material blessing somehow takes away from our thanksgiving for spiritual blessings.

Part of our sin is failing over and over to get the balance right. It is with divine forgiving and grace that we are able to work and grow toward a balance that Paul describes in Philippians like this: *Christians are thankful for all of God's gifts, especially his eternal gifts, and especially the value of knowing the Son, as the Spirit-become-physical.*

Redeemed for Thanksgiving.

Third, God, in the person of the Son Jesus, entered into world and lived in perfect appreciation of the Father. The Son died on our behalf for our chronic problems of ingratitude. Jesus – God made man – showed us the perfect life of thankfulness. This is reflected time and again in the New Testament Gospels.

Matthew 11:25 “At that time Jesus declared, “*I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father for such was your gracious will.*”

John 11:14 “... they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted his eyes and said, ‘Father, *I thank you that you have heard me.*’” [Then Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead.]

Mark 8:6 “Jesus took the seven loaves and the fish and *having given thanks* he broke them and gave them to the disciples...”

Jesus is not only God himself; but he is the quintessential thankful human. God-become-man not only died to forgive our failures in giving God the thanks that is his due, but also lived the perfect life of appreciation on our behalf, toward God the Father.

Freed for Thanksgiving.

Finally, by faith in Jesus, we are redeemed. Being redeemed means someone has done something to offset our poor behavior. It means to atone and make amends for past actions, thoughts, deeds done or not done, for our sins.

It's forgiveness and salvation in that we are saved from our past.

It's when Jesus was on the cross, and the thief next to him said, Jesus remember me. And Jesus replied, “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

You are forgiven.

Your past sins are washed clean.

The scales have been balanced.

And we realize the thief didn't do anything to merit his salvation. All he did was to ask Jesus to remember him. It was Jesus who did all the work; who made the sacrifice; who died and rose again that we might all be in paradise with him.

Only through Jesus, the very epitome of appreciation, can we become the kind of thankful people God created us to be. The kind of life that flows continually from such amazing grace is the life of continuous thankfulness. Paul encourages Christians to have lives that embody thanksgiving.

For the Christian, with both feet planted firmly in the good news of Christ, there are limitless possibilities for a true thanksgiving which otherwise we would not know.