

Living a Life of Thanksgiving

Dear Friends,

Later this month many people will gather with family and friends to offer thanks for the blessings in their life. Modern history tends to glorify the Thanksgiving story. Retailers would have us believe the celebration is all about turkeys, pilgrims, and cornucopias, not to mention the newest part of this holiday—Black Friday sales. I dare say this was not a part of the original story! Were the pilgrims thankful for God's blessings? Certainly they were, especially given all they had survived to get to this new land; a rough voyage and harsh weather in an unfamiliar place.

Robert Tracy McKenzie, a reporter for the Washington Post, in a 2013 article entitled "Five Myths About Pilgrims," dispels some of the common lore surrounding Thanksgiving. Among the common misconceptions is that the pilgrims celebrated the first American Thanksgiving. He points out that the Native Americans had a long tradition of harvest feasts, not to mention evidence of a thanksgiving service held in 1564 near present-day Jacksonville, Florida, by French Huguenots. The next year, Spanish documents refer to a thanksgiving Mass celebrated at St. Augustine by conquistadores, who, ironically, would later slaughter the Huguenots. McKenzie's point about the pilgrims, while remembered in popular history as the first to celebrate Thanksgiving, stand in a long line of those who celebrate the harvest.

The truth is, harvest festivals have been around for many years. We read in Exodus 23:16, "You shall keep the Feast of Harvest, of the firstfruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall keep the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor." God had commanded His people to celebrate the Feast of Harvest as a way of remembering His gracious goodness to them. The One who provided for His people simply wanted them to stop and give thanks. It reminds me of how we often teach children to exercise their manners and to say "thank you." The world in which we live seems to need that reminder from time to time to stop and offer our thanks to the Almighty God.

I would have to admit that I often fail at stopping to give thanks and find it far easier, like many people, to complain over what I don't have rather than celebrating the many ways God has blessed me. I sometimes struggle with an attitude of gratitude. In those times, I am often humbled as God opens my eyes to see His rich blessings all around me. Our wonderful God reminds me that I am blessed to be a blessing and that if I want to experience a true spirit of gratefulness it comes in serving Him by serving others. When I can take the focus off me and put it on helping someone else, I find a sense of joy and accomplishment.

In Philippians 1 the Apostle Paul writes, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God."

Paul found great joy in his relationships with other members of the body of Christ, and the partnership he shared with them in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. His simple advice to the Philippians was to abound in love. Love isn't just what we say, but is seen in what we do. This is what Jesus meant when He said, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." That love is played out in acts of service to others, reaching out to connect people to Jesus! I recently saw the newest Carmax commercial about what it takes to be a Carmax employee. It places a focus on serving others, whether it be rescuing a beached whale or helping in an old time barn raising. It shows a number of scenarios where the employee goes above and beyond what we might imagine. Their tag line is, "Because helping people is what our people are all about." What a great line for followers of Christ to adopt!

The first time I saw the commercial it caught my attention. I thought to myself, "Wow, Carmax gets it, why can't the Church in our day?" In a consumer oriented society it is easy to get pulled into an "entitlement" mentality that looks at what can be done for "me" rather than what I can do for others. What might happen if the church stepped out and reclaimed our heritage as God's children, living and serving the world around us in His love! I'm certain it would make an impact as people saw our words in action. This is where transformation often takes place, and it's why the district vision is to equip, empower and engage to connect people to Jesus.

It all begins with hearts filled with thankfulness for all the blessings God has given us. We have so much for which we can give thanks. If your able to read this, you should be thankful; if you get to worship you should be thankful; if you have food to eat, be thankful; if you have a bed to sleep in, be thankful; and if you have the hope and promise of eternal life in Jesus, be thankful! This kind of thankfulness is enhanced when in results in service to others both within and outside the body of Christ. It also makes it more impactful for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

As the Church we have the opportunity to show our thanksgiving to God in tangible ways as we reach beyond our campus and into the community around us with the love of Jesus. This is why the Florida-Georgia District is challenging our congregations to start two new missions or ministries in each of the district regions for each of the next five years, especially as we celebrate the 70th Anniversary of the District. A special 70th Anniversary offering kicks off this weekend to show our thankfulness to God. If every member of the Florida-Georgia District were to give a one time gift of \$70 we would easily raise over \$3.5 million for our mission loan program, a perpetual fund that uses dollars to raise up new ministry starts. There are so many opportunities all around us, and this is one way to simply show our gratefulness to God.

In a few weeks our nation will once again pause for a harvest celebration of Thanksgiving. This year, make it something more. Let your thankfulness be visible. Let it result in service for another. Find a way to show your thanks to our gracious God, in some small way by serving someone else. Not only will you find joy and blessing, but you'll also share the joy and blessing of Jesus with someone else! With hearts of thanksgiving, celebrate God's blessings, but don't keep them to yourself. Let it fill you with an attitude of gratitude as you serve others in Jesus' name!

With a thankful heart,

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