



....give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. I Thessalonians 5:18 (RSV)

I'm writing this the day before Thanksgiving. It's a national holi(holy) day in the United States but other countries celebrate it too. For example in Canada Thanksgiving is observed (as I recall) early in October. It's almost a bigger family gathering than Christmas. I suspect it's celebrated so widely today at this time of the year because travel in October and November is less problematic (although that may not have been the case originally), roads are generally clear and families can make more certain plans. If the cousins can't show up for the meal, there's more leftover turkey and who needs that?

In popular national mythology, Thanksgiving has been connected to the experiences of the Pilgrims in the Plymouth Bay colony who had experienced a very difficult first winter on these shores during which half of the group had died. Had it not been for a Native American's taking up their cause, the whole colony might have disappeared. But following a good harvest and the opportunity to set aside provisions for what might be a hard New England (notice the name that connected the area to their native land) winter, the colonists would be able to give thanks for food and eat no matter what the future might hold for them or the weather forecaster might say.

But that's our national mythology. In reality, the day became a national holiday when Abraham Lincoln about 150 years ago in the desperate days of the Civil War "proclaimed" in a presidential executive order a national day of Thanksgiving. It was signed and distributed by Secretary of State William Henry Seward. If you were at our Thanksgiving worship service, you may have had occasion to read it. What's interesting about that declaration is that the day of thanksgiving was proclaimed in 1863 at a time when the outcome of the war was still in doubt.

Lincoln's proclamation of thanksgiving observance for the nation is interesting enough in itself for comment. You may notice in his proclamation for example, that his theology attributes the horrors of the war (more persons died in the Civil War than in all of our other wars combined) as a punishment for the sins of the nation (I suppose both past and present). Lincoln believed that there was and would be no way for the nation to escape the judgments of God. And

yet he proclaimed thanksgiving for the nation! He echoes the words of the Apostle: “...give thanks in all circumstances.”

Which raises the interesting question of how a good, gracious, generous God could allow the suffering through which the nation was passing? The notion flies in the face of (as Timothy Keller writes) the arrogant and shallow notion and assumption that God would have no reason to allow something to happen for which I myself can't see a purpose....and if I cannot see any purpose, then there can't be any. Keller observes and writes that people who have actually gone through real suffering often respond to that experience to report later that their suffering was in the end a positive, constructive, life-changing and good experience. I talked with a person recently who said almost exactly that in their own words.

Further, Christians believe that God has faced the brutal realities of our suffering and sin and been victorious. Christians believe victory is not with our suffering but with him and that *we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. (Romans 8:37).*

May God bless all our thanksgivings in all circumstances.
Pastor T.