

Summary:

“Looking With Gratitude,” the third and final in our series, “It’s a Wonder-full Life,” by Rev. Jay Anderson at Church of the Master United Methodist, Westerville, OH, Sunday, November 24, 2019.

Detail:

Thanksgiving Day, when I was a kid, was always a moving target. My earliest Thanksgiving memories involved our family gathering with several others at one family’s home each year. There were lots of kids my age and, and while the house where we gathered was not large, it didn’t seem overly cramped either.

I grew up believing that these persons were family - that these kids were our cousins - but later learned that no, they were friends from our church and their extended families whom my parents had known for years. It sure felt like family.

But going anywhere other than Smith and Bitty’s house for Thanksgiving was unthinkable.

Even if they were not biological relatives, we still had “family” traditions on that day. Early in the morning a few of the men would often go deer hunting together, so it was not unusual for there to be to a deer hanging in the garage waiting to be butchered when we arrived mid-morning. The house was located next to a city park near the Ohio River, so we kids often had the run of the park and the neighborhood before and after the meal, where we would play, climb trees, roll down hills, skip rocks on the water, and just be kids. Of course there were the Thanksgiving Day Parades on TV - back when they were actually parades and not three hours of advertising.

There was turkey and ham to eat, with all the sides, and there lots of homemade pies, including a cinnamon-sugar lattice-crust peach pie, which was my favorite.

In the afternoon football was on TV, the grownups played euchre at the now empty kitchen table, and various board games entertained us kids.

That was just how we did Thanksgiving - until we didn't.

After Dad died and Mom had to change jobs, our traditions evolved. Some years Mom worked on Thanksgiving, so depending on her shift we might still go to Smith's house, or we might hang out at home and then go have Thanksgiving dinner with her at the hospital where she worked. Sometimes it was a little of both, with time spent at both places. Thanksgiving traditions took on less importance as we grew older, became more independent, and as some of the elders became ill or passed. By my high school years our trips to the Smith's house were rare and what we did on Thanksgiving Day depended totally on Mom's work schedule.

By the time I got to college Thanksgiving was a four day break from school to hang with friends I hadn't seen in a while and a quick meal at home with Mom and step-dad, and maybe a sibling or two.

Things just changed with time, as life changed.

It was neither good nor bad, that's just how it was.

Other families have other more "traditional," less fluid ways of celebrating Thanksgiving together - Lynn's is like that, perhaps yours

too. But regardless of where we gather, when we gather, if we gather, what we eat, or what we do, Thanksgiving was intended to be less about a meal and more about an attitude.

We purportedly model our celebration after the “first Thanksgiving” between the Pilgrims and the Native Americans back in October of 1621, but Thanksgiving Day only began to be celebrated nationally after a proclamation by George Washington in 1789.

President Thomas Jefferson didn’t celebrate the day and it kind of languished nationally with only sporadic acknowledgement until 1863, when President Abraham Lincoln, at the height of the U.S. Civil War, proclaimed a national day of *“Thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens,”* to be celebrated on the last Thursday of November.

And in that declaration, made in the midst of some of the bloodiest fighting the nation had ever seen, in the aftermath of the Siege of Vicksburg and the Battle of Gettysburg - and Lincoln’s address there only days earlier - the document lays out much for which the nation had to be thankful.

“Almighty God,” it proclaimed. “In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign States to invite and to provoke their aggression, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere except in the theatre of military conflict; while that theatre has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union. Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defense, have not arrested the plough, the shuttle, or the ship; the axe had enlarged the borders of our settlements, and the mines, as well of iron and coal as of the precious metals, have yielded even more abundantly than heretofore.

Population has steadily increased, notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege and the battle-field; and the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years, with large increase of freedom.”

Talk about a glass-half-full attitude!

Armies threaten the nation’s capital, young men are dying in battle all across the country, and the President has found a way to give thanks to God for the blessings of peace with foreign countries even as there was no peace to be had in this one, a growth in farming and construction, the expansion of borders, the increased production in the mining industry, and increasing population despite the incredible numbers dying in battle, and a large increase in freedom, presumably referring at least in part to the Emancipation Proclamation.

What kind of faith must one have to be able to see that kind of silver-lining while shrouded in the darkest, stormiest part of the cloud. But those were the shared blessings that Lincoln raised, the things we could be thankful for, the gifts of God that we held in common despite those ideas or beliefs that sought to break the nation and our people apart.

Our reading from Acts 4 depicts a community that could not be more different than the nation Lincoln led. While seemingly everything was a point of conflict for Lincoln’s America, Luke tells us that in the early church,

“The community of believers was one in heart and mind. None of them would say, ‘This is mine!’ about any of their possessions, but held everything in common.”

These portrayals of the early Christian communities in Acts 2 and 4 raise red flags for many European and American readers today. Some

commentators have likened it to a kind of “Christian communism,” believing that such extensive sharing - so that *“everything they owned was held in common”* - was not only unrealistic, but somehow dangerous. But we should understand, these texts are idealistic - they name facets of the earliest community’s experience, character, and intentions. Whatever happened historically across the broader expanse of Christian communities, Luke’s depiction of this one proclaims a message as purposeful as it is provocative, as aspirational as it is historical.

Consider the context. The rise of the early church follows the event of Pentecost, which we read about in chapter 2 of Acts.

The community, it says, devotes itself to worship, instruction, fellowship, and sharing. Just prior to our text for today, Peter and John are interrogated and released by Jerusalem’s leaders, which inspires prayer in the gathered community. In doing so, the Holy Spirit fills them and they speak God’s message with “boldness.”

It should then come as no surprise to us that Luke emphasizes throughout Acts that the gospel needed to be proclaimed with **boldness** and not timidity.

After all, in the first volume of his two-part history, the Gospel of Luke, the disciples are anything **but** bold, even running away and denying any knowledge of Jesus.

But now, his astonishing resurrection has emboldened them to speak his gospel, to share this good news.

And as a result of this bold conviction of the new power they have received from the Spirit, "the assembly of believers had one heart and soul."

Their unity of purpose and action is characteristic of the earliest community, a unity that is lived out in the fact that *“None of them would say, ‘This is mine!’ about any of their possessions, but held everything in common.”*

And they did that so as to better witness to the resurrection of the one they called Lord - the risen Jesus.

As a further result, God's great favor comes upon them. And like the words of Lincoln's declaration centuries later, even in the midst and immediate aftermath of these literally earth-shaking events, they are thankful for the ways in which God has blessed them and they seek to find a way to be a blessing to others.

And Acts 4:34 offers the clearest reason why they found it necessary to hold all in common; their primary concern was that there be no one needy among them.

Jesus' marching orders to them in Matthew's gospel were that they were to feed the hungry, care for the sick, clothe the naked, and visit the prisoner.

In John's gospel, the apostles have a lakeshore breakfast with the risen Jesus where he instructs them, “feed my sheep.” So, when Luke writes,

“Those who owned properties or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds from the sales, and place them in the care and under the authority of the apostles.

Then it was distributed to anyone who was in need...”

these actions refer directly to the Law found in Deuteronomy 15:4, where it says,

“When God blesses you in your land, there will be no needy person among you.”

Indeed, Deuteronomy 15:1-18 has primarily to do with the sharing of possessions. Luke thus proclaims that the new community of the resurrected Lord has heard the voice of the prophet announced by Deuteronomy, is making certain that there is no needy person among them, and is thereby enjoying the blessings promised by God to those who act accordingly.

The Christian community is thus fulfilling what had been promised to and demanded from the people of Israel some 700 years earlier.

So, there is certainly a utopian quality to Luke's vision that I think, realistically, prevents its being used as a simple yardstick for measuring all forms of Christian community - a standard by which nearly all would fail. Instead, our passage reads best not as a blueprint for today but as a glimpse of a dynamic, lived experience by a community enlivened by God's Spirit. It gives us a hint, a hope, for what is possible.

So, this text says less about model church practices and more about the dynamic power of God among believers. And yet, the jarring features of radical generosity in Acts 4 should not be dismissed.

As theologian Luke Timothy Johnson observes, throughout history the church has far too often been a "sign of wealth rather than of poverty and has aligned itself with the rich and powerful on earth more than the weak and lowly."

How the radical sharing of Acts 4:32-35 speaks to our own church cultures is an open question, but certainly practices of "inspired" generosity would lend greater substance to our testimony.

Despite the idealism of Luke's vision, the narrative's call for an embodied witness on the part of Jesus' followers stands. As church, how do we embody the message of Jesus by our life together?

Or to borrow from our message last week, how do we live an incarnational faith?

As our writer points out,

“The early Christian community expected Jesus' return sooner rather than later and so their communal practices of selling everything may have actually led to some hardship down the road. But rather than dismiss the story because of their shortsightedness, we can acknowledge how a faith that invites gratitude for continued renewed life also invites the kind of communal living in which no one is left out, no one feels alone, no one fears for their well-being.

This is the true richness of a wonder-full life.

We wonder at the companionship and hospitality of Jesus' followers to everyone in all walks of life... including whether we “have it all” or don't have “two pennies to rub together.” The more we cultivate relationship in our lives, the more we increase our chances that in every moment we will be loved and supported and will have the opportunity to return the same hospitality.

This “investment” of ourselves in beloved community increases our constant and enduring hope and gratitude.”

We live in a nation divided and belong to a denomination divided. Yet, those things which we hold in common far outnumber those

things that seek to separate us. We are blessed in more ways than we recognize and are loved by a God whose love is without end, without limit, and without exception.

We are beloved children of the God who became one of us and one with us in the flesh, in the incarnation we know in Jesus the Christ. We are a community who, despite our different understandings, our different traditions, our different practices, share in common a love for God, a love for Jesus, a love for peace, a love for justice, a love for our church, and a love for one another. These are the things we hold in common, that there will be no one in need among us. As we love one another, as we love our neighbor - those like us and those who are not - so we love God.

In a few minutes we're going to ask you to prayerfully make your financial commitment to the vision, the mission, and the ministry of our church for next year.

We ask for a commitment - or at least an estimate - so that we, like you in your household budgeting, can carefully and prayerfully plan for how these gifts that we hold in common can best be used to change lives, impact our community, and build relationship with those who need to know the love of Jesus Christ in their lives that we know and hold together in ours.

We've used the film *It's a Wonderful Life* as a model for our series, and at the end of that film is a joyful celebration of community and generosity, in which George Bailey's thankfulness, his gratitude for how his community has cared for he and his family, is infectious.

At the heart of our relationship to money is **living and giving with gratitude**—whether the gifts we have to give are monetary, or our own capital of time and energy given for the sake of the human family.

When we align our money practices with the courageous vision we see for ourselves and for our community and the impact we hope to have for Christ, we can cultivate the hope and the possibility that we will transform our fear into gratitude in the act of sharing, transforming our money practices into spiritual practices.

In her book *Grateful: The Subversive Practice of Giving Thanks*, historian and author Diana Butler Bass shares this Thanksgiving Prayer, that I would like to conclude with today. So let's end in prayer, shall we?

God, there are days we do not feel grateful.

When we are anxious or angry. When we are alone. When we do not understand what is happening in the world, or with our neighbors.

We struggle to feel grateful.

But this Thanksgiving, we choose gratitude.

We choose to accept life as a gift from you, from the unfolding work of all creation. We choose to be grateful for the earth from which our food comes; for the water that gives life; and for the air we all breathe.

We make the choice to see our ancestors, those who came before us, and their stories, as a continuing gift of wisdom for us today. We choose to see our families and friends with new eyes, appreciating them for who they are, and be thankful for our homes whether humble or grand. We will be grateful for our neighbors, no matter how they voted or how much we feel hurt by them. We choose to see the whole planet as our shared commons, the public stage of the future of humankind and creation.

God, this Thanksgiving, we do not give thanks.

We choose it.

And we will make thanks, with strong hands and courageous hearts. When we see your sacred generosity, we become aware that we live in an infinite circle of gratitude. That we all are guests at a hospital table around which gifts are passed and received.

We will not let anything opposed to love take over this table.

Instead, we choose to see Grace, free and unmerited love, the giftedness of life everywhere, as the tender web of all creation. In this choosing, and in the making, we will pass gratitude on to the world.

Thus, with you, and with all those gathered here, we pledge to make thanks. And we ask you to strengthen us in this resolve. Here, now, and into the future.

Around this table. Around the table of our nation.

Around the table of the earth. Amen.