

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
THANKSGIVING/COMMITMENT SUNDAY
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
GOOD NEWS ABOUT THANKSGIVING
Matthew 6:25-33; Mark 5:18-20
November 22, 2009
8:45 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

Thanksgiving in the U.S. is usually traced to 1621 when a Pilgrim leader, William Bradford, proclaimed a day of feasting to commemorate the first harvest after a long year of suffering. Perhaps not much unlike what many have been through this year. What you may not know is that, as the colonies grew more prosperous, the people forgot all about Thanksgiving and the meaning it held for their ancestors. For generations Thanksgiving was celebrated sporadically, if at all, with no set date.

Then in 1822 Sarah Hale, a young widow from New Hampshire, decided to revive this important celebration. Sarah, a mother of five children and an editor of a women's magazine, began a 40-year campaign of writing editorials and letters to governors and presidents to get Thanksgiving officially recognized as a national holiday. Three Presidents turned her down. Her obsession became a reality, however, when in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the last Thursday in November as an annual celebration of Thanksgiving. (1)

It's interesting that it should have been Lincoln that responded to Sarah's request. His own life was at a very low ebb at the time. The country was literally falling apart and Lincoln's political future looked bleak. **“Many of the members of his own cabinet openly despised him, and joked about him in public. His wife had been investigated as a possible traitor--a process which Lincoln personally found to be bitterly wounding. In the face of such personal and national circumstances, Lincoln's call for a day of prayer would have made sense. But Thanksgiving? At a time like that? What must he have been**

thinking of?" (2) No wonder historians count Lincoln as one of our truly great presidents.

Interestingly enough, Sarah Hale, the widow who championed the cause of Thanksgiving is not remembered for that act. Rather she is much better known as the author of a little poem written in 1830 which begins like this: **"Mary had a little lamb, Its fleece was white as snow . . ."**

As the late Paul Harvey would say, **"Now you know the rest of the story . . ."**

There is something healthy about giving thanks. Notice that I did not say there is something healthy about Thanksgiving meals. Most of us will overindulge this Thanksgiving, just as we do every Thanksgiving.

There is a humorous story that actress Helen Hayes, **"First Lady of the American Theatre"** used to tell on herself. As she retired to the kitchen to put the finishing touches to a Thanksgiving dinner she was preparing, she warned her family: **"This is the first turkey I've ever cooked. If it isn't right, I don't want anybody to say a word. We'll just get up from the table, without comment, and go down to the hotel for dinner."**

She returned some ten minutes later to find the family seated expectantly at the dinner table--wearing their hats and coats.

I don't know about you, but I don't think I've ever had a bad Thanksgiving meal. The danger isn't that the meal won't be tasty. The danger is that we will consume too much. Thanksgiving meal may not be too healthy for us, but the act of giving thanks is one of the most spiritually beneficial exercises we can perform.

Giving thanks reminds us how blessed we are. For example:

Because you woke up this morning and were able to hear the birds sing, use your vocal cords to utter human sounds, walk to the breakfast table on two good legs, and read the newspaper with two good eyes . . . you are more blessed than millions this morning who could not do those simple things.

If you have never experienced the danger of battle, the loneliness of imprisonment, the agony of torture, or the pangs of starvation . . . you are ahead of 500 million people in the world.

Because you can worship this morning without fear of harassment, arrest, torture, or death . . . you are more blessed than three billion people in the world.

If you have food in your refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof overhead and a place to sleep . . . you are richer than 75% of this world.

If you have money in the bank, in your wallet, and spare change in a dish some place . . . you are among the top 8% of the world's wealthy.

If you are over thirty and either of your parents is still alive you are very rare. Over a billion people are orphans by then.

If you can hold up your head with a smile on your face and are truly thankful . . . you are blessed because the majority can, but most do not.

Giving thanks reminds us how blessed we are. This is not to say that you and I do not have problems. We do, but for most of us, our blessings far outweigh our burdens.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus spoke these magnificent words: ***“Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his***

kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

What is there about many of us that we fixate on our burdens rather than our blessings? How can we say we are people of faith, when so much of our life is lived not by faith, but by fear? Giving thanks reminds us how blessed we are.

Giving thanks also reminds us of the source of our blessings. Giving thanks reminds us how much God loves us.

Each year our young people go on a mission trip. I think that every person who joins the church should go on a mission trip within the first five years of joining. Our young people learn what it means to give love to other in need. Last week they shared in both services how much they had learned and gained as a result of their outreach. We give thanks for the blessings our young people shared. Giving thanks reminds us how much God loves us. When you start counting your blessings, you are reminded just how good God has been to you. After all, these blessings don't just happen. There is a Source of everything we have.

Pastor Jack Walchenbach tells about a professor of chemistry he had in college. One day over a cup of coffee this professor said to him, **“You know, what holds an atom together is not the nucleus, but an invisible force between the protons and the electrons.”** The professor continued, **“I think that has something to do with religion, but I don't know how to express it.”** (2)

Well, it does have something to do with religion. Our lives didn't just happen. There is a creator God who gave us every wondrous gift. When we give thanks we are reminded of the source of everything we have.

And one final thing! **When we give thanks, even as we come to deposit our pledge cards to fund the ministry of this church for another year, we are reminded that we can only share from what the Lord has already done for us.** In Mark's Gospel, Jesus heals a man who has been possessed by a demon. Afterward, the man begs Jesus to let him come with him. He wants to be one of his disciples. Surprisingly, Jesus turns him down. Rather, he gives the man these instructions, **“Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has**

done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.” So, Mark tells us, “The man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.”

If you are truly thankful for the blessings God has bestowed upon you, then share that story with others. Of course, the best way to share the story is to share the blessings.

You and I have been so blessed. We need Thanksgiving to remind us of those blessings and to remind us of the source of those blessings. Now we prepare to make our commitment to God. Let our pledge or gift serve to show *“how much the Lord has done for [us].”* Let’s keep Thanksgiving all year long.

If you are among those who are thankful at a time when things are difficult, you are not alone. I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.

1. Dr. Michael L. Coulter, Remembering Thanksgiving's Political Past, http://www.visandvals.org/Remembering_Thanksgivings_Political_Past.php?&printable=true, November 25, 2003 Dr. Michael Coulter is associate professor of political science at Grove City College in Grove City, Pa.
2. David J. Schlafer, *What Makes This Day Different?* (Boston, MA: Cowley Publications, 1998), p. 123.
3. <http://www.wpedurham.org/Sermons/11262006jack.htm>.