

Sermon Bytes: Giving Thanks

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In C S Lewis's book called the Screwtape Letters, there is a correspondence between two devils – Wormwood and his protégé. Wormwood tries to answer a question about how to destroy people's belief in God. The court of devils had considered the question of hiding God so that the people will end up forgetting who God is and what God is up to. One suggested that God be hidden on the dark side of the moon. This proposal was debated for some time but eventually voted down because it was believed that one day scientists would discover a means of space travel and God would be found again.

Another idea was that of burying God beneath the depths of the ocean floor. This was voted down for basically the same reason - scientific advancement would lead to the discovery of God even beneath the depths of the ocean floor.

Finally the oldest and wisest of the counsellors had a flash of insight. "I know", he said, "why don't we hide God where no one will ever think to look?" "If we hide God in the ordinary events of people's everyday lives they'll never find him." And so it was done - and they say that people are still looking for God - even today.

Today is a special day because at Thanksgiving time, we see God around us in the normal and routine parts of our lives a little more clearly than we normally do. It helps, of course, that this is Thanksgiving Sunday. The scripture lessons focus on what God has done, and the decorations in the sanctuary and the beauty of the fall outside, foster in us an natural appreciation for God's handicraft. Indeed the very atmosphere at this time of year seems to encourage us to pause and to identify just how blessed we are, just how much we are recipients of God's grace.

And that's good – because it leads us into the transforming wonder of thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving is an important part of our faith, and by this I mean much more than this day we call thanksgiving – much more than what our national politicians agreed on back in 1878 and codified in 1957. Namely, that the second Monday of October would be celebrated as a holiday – a general day of thanksgiving to God for the bounty of the harvest with which Canada had been blessed

Thanksgiving is much more than a date on the calendar, even as a holiday. It is a state of mind and attitude of gratitude, an attitude that is needed if we are to experience the fullness of life and the grace and joy of God

Look at this building -- this sanctuary – everything about it and everything in it, from the cross at the front to the doors at the back. It is here by the grace of God. Indeed we are here by the grace of God.

In the 26th chapter of Deuteronomy, the people of Israel are told that they should bring their offerings to the temple. And as they do they are to remember "The Lord brought us

into this place, and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first fruit of the land, which you, O God, have given me." And that they should share their bounty with the widow and the orphan and the stranger in their midst.

It was an acknowledgement that the Lord has brought us here and the Lord has given us the fruit of the earth in this place - our daily bread. This is the message of all scripture - that everything around us, and everything that we are and everything that we have, is a gift of God..

Indeed the scriptures go further - they remind us that the gifts of God are often given to us through others,- some through the work of other folk who are known to us, - some through folk who will always be unknown to us, nameless servants of God's grace.

Look at this building again - this gift from God. The decorations were placed here yesterday by particular people. They just didn't happen to show up. Time and energy was expended, - time and energy which could have been used for a shopping trip or a visit with a friend, but which was instead dedicated to the glory of God.

The Youth Worship doesn't just happen. Those classes, the music from the choir, the chimes, the pews we sit on - everything here represents a series of gifts. They are gifts of God - gifts that have come to us through the labour and the dedication of the people beside you, of the people who went before you and of the people who went before them.

An attitude of gratitude is helpful way of looking at the world. Without the attitude of gratitude our lives, our health and the health of our families and of our church are under threat.

A few years ago Dr. Nick Stinnett of the University of Nebraska conducted a group of studies called the "Family Strengths Research Project". Stinnett and his researchers identified six qualities that make for strong families. The first quality and the most important to be found in strong families was the quality of appreciation. These families regularly express their appreciation for what the other members DO and for who they ARE.

In a similar study another researcher looked into the effect of praise in the workplace. His study showed that the ratio of praise to criticism in the workplace needs to be four to one before employees feel that there is a balance - that is four times as much praise as there is criticism before they feel good about their work and about the environment they work in.

When you think of it, that is pretty exciting information. It tells us that if we want to have a healthy relationship or family, a strong workplace, or any effective committee or church, that we need to be sure that appreciation, praise, and thanksgiving are heard at least four times as often as is criticism.

It is very easy to get discouraged - to get down in life. We might be living in chronic pain, or suffering from a decline in the standard of living - or we may simply not feel appreciated or valued by others. Any of a hundred things could be assailing us and making us feel miserable - even making us question God.

That is normal get down at times. But at that point and time it is more important than ever that we fall back on that attitude of gratitude - looking around and adding up life's little blessings.

One of the most beautiful people I ever met was a 47 year old paraplegic. I met Tony at the hospital's extended care ward at St Joseph's hospital in London. He had been there for more than half of his life. Every day he dealt with unbearable pain and there was no family to share his life with. But every day Tony got himself up and into his motorized wheel chair and went down to the curb and got a stack of papers and delivered them to the various floors - some to patients who could not even leave their rooms but loved to read.

Along the way he would tell people stories, bring them news about newcomers or those who were sick or who had died. He knew everybody's name and their birthdays and was constantly leaving little gifts. He was a light in a dark place – full of joy and peace despite his own troubles and woes. When I spoke to him, Tony would often give thanks to God for some little thing of the day. His faith, His love and His compassion was rooted in his attitude of gratitude

A marriage counsellor suggested that one of the problems that people struggle with in relationships is that media teaches us to either to go with our gut - follow our feelings -or to figure things out - to work everything out rationally. Consequently – a lot of the little things in life happen or don't, depending on whether we feel like it or not. When we've lost a feeling for something we discard it. For example, we believe that "if I feel love for you I will act in a loving way."

The counsellor's premise is the opposite. It is this - if I act in a loving way, my love feeling will grow. And so she recommends that clients do various "caring exercises" each and every day - one of which is of course - the expression of appreciation and gratitude – of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving should not wait until we feel like giving thanks.

Look around you. Find that which is good and thank God for it. Find that which is caring and thank God. Find the person who is making a difference and thank God and them. Look around, look within, look outside, and think on that which is noble and true and beautiful, and express your praise for it. Express it. Don't wait to feel it – do it

God is hidden in the ordinary routine events of our life. Our practice of thank-giving will open our eyes and in so doing bring to others and ourselves a glimpse of a better world. Thanks be to God - AMEN