

## **We Are: A THANKFUL COMMUNITY!**

Showing our Gratitude!

Thanksgiving has long been one of my favorite holidays. My home church growing up had an early morning hike from the church (up a few blocks, across the creek, through the park, and back through town), breakfast, a youth-led service, and the Annual Turkey Bowl (in the field behind the YMCA, wet or dry, warm or cold, and at least a couple of times in several inches of snow). The afternoon was family time, and usually we got together with my aunt Margaret, uncle Duane, and cousin Nancy for the Thanksgiving Turkey Feast. I liked all that was involved, but also the holiday of Thanksgiving because you just had to believe in our country and the idea that Pilgrims and Indians could sit down once long ago to share a harvest meal. It is a simple holiday that doesn't require complicated theological constructs, mythologizing or de-mythologizing, nor the selection of gifts nor a whole lot of decorating. It also provides opportunities for simple crafts in school and Sunday School, since just about anyone can make a hand-shaped Turkey and a couple of pipe cleaner Pilgrims and Indians, and for those more creative amongst us, a popsicle stick fort is a nice addition to the scene.

Thanksgiving gives us a long weekend's pause on the headlong rush to the more religious solstice timed end of the year holidays. Of course 20<sup>th</sup> century commerce filled part of that weekend with Black Friday, but recently e-commerce has made it possible for us to shop anytime beginning some sales on Monday, and some stores started extending Black Friday to Thursday evening as of last year. We can still choose to ignore the sales and take the weekend off, or watch football games! For the most part, Thanksgiving Thursday remains a quiet time for gatherings of families and friends and churches, a time to remember all those things for which we are grateful.

Famed late 13<sup>th</sup> and early 14<sup>th</sup> Century Dominican theologian and preacher Meister Eckhart said that if the only prayer a person ever offers is Thank You, that is enough. Expressing our gratitude to each other, the divine, and the universe is important for us and for those around us. Taking time to say Thank You reminds us that we are part of an interconnected, interdependent network of beings. Even when we discover and describe the most interesting and important things, we do so on the basis of all we have learned from others, on the whole compendium of human knowledge. Whether the great gift of fire was stolen from the gods or learned from a lightning strike, it was not likely just imagined by one human being, but rather observed and adapted to human use. As independent as we sometimes imagine we are, we are observers who discover ways to adapt stuff, processes, and ideas to new uses. God or the universe and humanity have blessed us with an infinite array of things and interactions to observe, and we ought to be thankful for all that we see and all that we engage.

In the human community, we ought to be especially thankful for all those around us, for from their lessons and missteps we continue to learn all our days. In churches, we are fairly good at remembering to say Thank You to others and thinking about the positive interactions that make our lives better. So, in a few minutes, I will ask you to share things that you are thankful for today!

Thankfulness, gratitude, can be a very enriching way of life. I am sometimes envious of those who consistently practice an attitude of gratitude, for it reminds me that I do not thank others often enough for all the love and caring and gifts that I receive. Even things that at the time do not seem good often teach lessons about humility, caution, or more honest self-assessment. There are so many things we have yet to learn, and not all lessons are pleasant. We learn from pain as well as pleasure, from good times as well as bad, from sorrow as well as joy. With our big brains, we are like sponges absorbing a myriad of experiences, processing and categorizing and remembering.

So much to be thankful for, the good, the bad, and the ugly! And of course, we are thankful most for the wonderful, the beautiful, the harmonious, and the joyful, but all these experiences are gifts and lessons from which we can learn if we maintain an attitude of gratitude! And preaching to myself at least as much as to anyone else, we can sure use an attitude of gratitude when we prepare to face the holiday mobs, whining husbands, crying children, exasperated wives... joyful, joyful we all thank thee for the lessons that you teach!

These last few days, the universe has blessed us with waters from heaven, not nearly enough to break the drought but enough to water the plants and trees and clear the air and refresh us. For the rains and snows that fall, we are truly thankful, especially in this third year of drought! We are thankful for each of the seasons and cycles of the year, for the warmth of the summer, the green of the spring, the vibrant colors of the fall, and the quiet dormant time of winter with the snows in the mountains. We are thankful for the earth, this amazingly hospitable planet that is our home, for blue waters and green fields, for forests and mountains and deep lakes and flowing rivers, for food and water to sustain billions of our companions and forests and wild places to protect billions of animals and trees and plants.

We are thankful for our friends and our relatives, for parents and children, for grandparents we see too infrequently and aunts and uncles we see too often, for cousins of every degree, and nephews and nieces and brothers and sisters and all kinds of in-laws and even some outlaws. We are thankful for peers and colleagues, for spouses and girlfriends and boyfriends and all those other people that make our lives interesting!

We are thankful for honest work and better retirement, for vocational challenges and institutions of higher learning, for physical and mental labor and adequate rest. We are thankful for all the pieces of our lives, the wisdom we gain and the knowledge we too soon forget, for mountain peaks of enlightenment and days of humbling drudgery. We are thankful for days spent with friends and hours with lovers.

We are thankful for family time and school time and work time and play time. We are thankful for philosophical discussions and for mindless games. We are thankful for travels and moments at home. We are thankful for songs sung around the campfire and quiet times in front of our fireplaces. We are even thankful for the misunderstandings that lead to greater understanding and the difficult times that lead to better times. For both simple and complicated moments of our lives, we are thankful!

There are also those frustrating times in our lives when things get completely out of control and we have to go back and work through significant miscommunications and serious misunderstandings, making changes which are even more challenging, facing our own shortcomings, needing to take one or several steps back from what we thought we were doing to develop new plans and sometimes new relationships. For the lessons of even these times, we are grateful, at least in retrospect!

Our lives are journeys with many stops, many pathways, many experiences. Some of those moments will be painful, difficult, lonely, challenging, while others will be more joyous. This is the nature of our lives. We can choose how we respond, how we react to the less positive moments, and in seeing the lessons that will come, we can still be grateful. That attitude of gratitude can make a world of difference, not that it can take away the pain and suffering that sometimes comes, but that it gives us a more positive outlook which can help us more easily navigate the trials of this life.

Thankfulness, gratitude, can help us see things more hopefully when we are tempted to pessimism, sarcasm, and defeatism. In all things there is some good, that is what inherent worth is all about. Some things may be more clearly good, but if we look for it there usually is a silver lining, something good even in bad things.

We have been through some hard times in recent years. Many people suffered losses in the stock market that took years to recover, Stockton and Detroit went bankrupt, salaries and property values took a nosedive.

We have now recovered from some of those losses, but it has been a few hard years for many people, and like our nation after 9/11 there has been a loss of the optimism that often has helped to move the nation forward. Things are better now according to many measures, but we have not fully recovered from many of the challenges of recent years. Taking time to be thankful for all that we have can help to change our attitude and perhaps the mood of the country. It certainly can't hurt!

Mostly I have been addressing thankfulness from an individual perspective, but I want to wrap up with a few thoughts about the impact of gratitude on this congregation. I know that before I came here there were some times when certain people became quite judgmental. I know that we all have our critical sides and there is always something that could be done better in congregations, but an attitude of appreciation can really make a congregation far more attractive and interesting to those who might visit as well as for members. The warmth of a congregation in which people appreciate each other's efforts, even when things don't come out perfectly, is much more welcoming and affirming and inviting than a congregation that is always upset. We know we aren't perfect, but when we can appreciate each other it makes all the difference. Since I have been here, you all have been on your best behavior and I have really appreciated your appreciation. I hope that we can continue to appreciate each other as we continue to develop our relationship!

Early in the second century of this congregation, we have much for which to be thankful. We have a solid beautiful church building that has been well-maintained, a beautiful piano and a majestic organ, a cottage for Religious Education, and a community which is congenial and supportive. We have much wisdom accumulated among our members and a respected reputation in the broader community. We also have some challenges for which we can be thankful!

Not a perfect year or a perfect world, but not bad, and things seem to be looking up! So what are the things for which you are thankful today and this year? Thanks for Sharing! Happy Thanksgiving!