

“Giving Thanks”  
Pastor Norman Fowler  
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

November 26, 2017  
1 Kings 8:55-61; Colossians 3:12-17;  
Luke 17:11-19

We were invited to give thanks this last week. We have this one day of the year that we designate for the purpose of giving thanks. I thought about where that might have come from and I realized that in many ways this is something that happened throughout the millennia. People have gotten together at harvest time and given thanks for what they received and what came about. But to actually set aside a day, there's more to it.

We have the historical situations where the indigenous people and the new people got together and shared a meal. There are a number of stories of that. We often think of one particular one, but there were many that happened. Way back with George Washington, they thought about creating a day for thanksgiving, and some states began to do that.

It wasn't until the time of the Civil War where we actually had a national Thanksgiving Day. Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the last Thursday in November as Thanksgiving. I think it was an attempt on his part to get people to think beyond the conflict that they were having, the Civil War that was going on. It was an attempt to remind everyone to look to heaven and to remember the one who resides there, the one who brought us all together, the one whose children we are. Whether that worked or not is another point, but I believe that's where it started.

It feels to me like as we've gone along it has become ingrained in our culture, become part of who we are. It's become more of a secular and family holiday—less to have to do with looking beyond and looking to God—and yet there is this idea of giving thanks.

Maybe you've already had this opportunity. I know at our table we asked everybody to say one thing they were thankful for. And realizing that could get a little somber or carry a lot of weight, we asked everybody to give something that is a little silly or not so important that you're thankful for. There is a joy in giving thanks.

Yet as I thought about it, in my own life I can begin to give thanks for things, maybe for friends and family, but as I read the scriptures there was another way that giving thanks struck me.

I saw a story this week. There was a wise woman walking in the mountains, and as she crossed a stream, she noticed a stone of great value. She reached down, picked it up, and put it in her bag. The next day, as she is traveling along, she meets another traveler who is very hungry. She opens her bag and offers him some food. As she does that, he sees the stone in her bag. My sense is that he was a very brash, hungry traveler because he then said, “May I have that stone.” Without hesitation, she reaches in and gives it to him. He is overjoyed because he knows that once the stone is cut and polished it will make him secure for the rest of his life. So they have lunch and he goes off. But the next day, he comes back to find her. He finds her, pulls out the stone, and

gives it back. He says, “I want something even more precious than this stone. I would like to know how you were able to give it to me. I want you to teach me to have that kind of ability. That’s more precious than this stone will ever be.”

You see, as I was thinking about it, it’s easy to think about the idea of security, the things I have and how thankful I am for them, the structure of my life and how grateful I can be for it. And yet it feels like there is something at the heart of it all that is more precious. Not a ring with its power, but there’s something more precious that we are given. It is perhaps because it is shared with us, it is even more precious.

One way we can see that is at the beginning of Colossians, where we are invited in a way to take off the clothing we had been wearing and put on new clothing, and not because it’s more trendy. It’s not even really clothing, but it is compassion, and kindness, and humility, and gentleness, and patience. These are the things that are more precious than any real stone can be.

It is that contrast between the societal sense of things and the scriptural. Each teaches and gives us a certain perspective and way of life. I believe we are given this scriptural way to be and to be together that feels more precious than any stone can ever be. I realize that these are very straightforward things. We all know the meaning of these words. We have probably heard them before as something that was offered to us from scripture.

So just as we might sit and take a moment to think about what we’re thankful for, I wondered: what is it that stands in the way of being compassionate? Why am I not always compassionate? What interferes with being kind? Why am I not always kind? What convinces me not to be humble? Where do I let go of gentleness? What denigrates my patience? Think about that for just a minute. Each of us could have something different for each one. With patience it may be that something gets on my nerves because it reminds me of something that happened in my past, and it brings up certain feelings that I don’t like. So being reminded reduces my ability to be patient. What are those things for you? I would invite you to take a moment to think for yourself about those things that interfere with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Maybe just pick one or two and think about what interferes.

It is interesting to think about those things that get in the way—things like jealousy or fear, anger or habit. Now, we’re supposed to be talking about Thanksgiving, and here I am asking you to think about the negatives in our lives, the ways we struggle to do something. We are given pretty a clear perspective on what’s a good way to be together where Christ is leading us. So it feels like that should be enough and I could be thankful for that.

But then I realize I don’t do those things as well as I would like, as well as I’m called to do. So there’s a second step. Maybe that’s what Jeremiah was getting at in the children’s sermon. Not only did the leper have to have that first healing, but the rest of the healing came with gratitude or recognition. But for me it’s a recognition not just that I’ve been given a way, a description of how to live, but I’ve been given a way to empower that way as well, through the forgiveness and grace of God.

It feels to me like these things I have in my life that keep me from being compassionate, that keep me from being generous and kind and humble, those are things I would call my sins, my struggles, my ways of not being able to really do what I want to do, be the person I want to be, be the community I want to be part of because sin, the things that we've struggled with, gets in the way.

And yet as we come again to God's grace, we realize that God says we are not stuck in those struggles if we let go and accept the grace of God, if we accept the forgiveness given in Jesus, if we accept that God comes and works with us to show us anew. It is as we allow that to happen, as we accept that forgiveness and show the forgiveness to one another, that we see the healing nature of what Christ does, the forgiveness that keeps us from getting stuck, the grace that comes in unexpectedly and lets us know we are loved and valued children of God, and that shifts our perspective enough that we begin to see that we're all valued children of God.

It is then, I think, when we can come with a full sense of gratitude. It's a gratitude that comes out of humility. A gratitude that comes through the very things that Colossians is talking about: a sense of compassion, of kindness, of humility, of gentleness, and of patience. When we see it given to us, it becomes something we can share. It's something so precious that we want to share it.

I really think that's what it's saying when it says we do everything in the name of Jesus. It doesn't mean we go around saying, "In Jesus' name I do this. In Jesus' name I do that." When it talks about doing things in Jesus' name it means doing it in the spirit of Jesus. In all we do, we are invited to do it in the spirit of Jesus. Expressing the love of God which binds it all together—binds us all together—and leads us into compassion, leads us into kindness, leads us into humility, leads us into generosity and patience. To tell you the truth, it is when I'm in that kind of circle life is really a lot better. Talk about a good life! And it's then we can truly give gratitude to God, not for a stone, but for life—a life that does bind us all together. Amen.