

Thanksgiving Eve Service  
St. Joseph on the Brandywine Church  
“And be thankful”  
November 21, 2017  
Thomas G. Speers, III

Lesson: Colossians 3: 12-17

My earliest memory of thanksgiving was when I was in First grade. We made outfits out of paper—black hats and I think we used grocery bags to make black coats so that we were supposed to look like the Pilgrims. I don't remember what the girls wore, but it would have been appropriate pilgrim attire. We had to memorize the 100<sup>th</sup> Psalm and then we recited that together—we used the King James Version of course. It was one of my first bits of memorization and it still comes back at least in part:

Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands.  
Serve the Lord with gladness: come before his presence with singing.  
Know ye that the Lord he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves;  
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.  
Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise:  
be thankful unto him, and bless his name.  
For the Lord is good; his mercy is everlasting; and his truth endureth to all  
generations.

We were very serious, as First graders can be, although not too serious or well behaved. My mother tells me that one of my classmates took a good punch at me as we waited to march onto the stage—I must have done something to provoke him, though he didn't leave too great a mark on me because I don't remember the punch even after my mother's reminding me. I'm glad my mom remembers, because we all know that Thanksgiving isn't perfect. It will be a hard day for some—because they don't have enough to host a big meal, or because they are facing difficult news, or because they are missing someone, or because their family is dysfunctional and that dysfunction is especially noticeable around a big Thanksgiving table. I've always liked Mary Karr's definition of a dysfunctional family as any family with more than one person in it.

I don't remember my classmate throwing a punch at me in first grade, but what I do remember more than paper pilgrims and the 100<sup>th</sup> psalm, more than turkey and stuffing and cranberry and melted marshmallows on top of sweet potatoes, more than an increasing recognition that this might not be a day of great celebration for all people, what I remember most is the importance of saying thank you.

Paul writes to the Colossians: Clothe yourselves in love...let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts...And be thankful. Professor John Koenig suggests that “if we can talk of something like a heartbeat within the New Testament, a pulsating center that pumps life to the whole body, it is properly named by the words *praise* and *thanksgiving*.”

I learned something about saying thank you from a marvelous woman named Mrs. Bennington. She was strong lady--and I chose that title on purpose--in the town where I grew up and we shared the same birthday. She never told me how old she was. When I asked she always responded: I'm as old as my tongue and a little bit older than my teeth.” She made a point of sending me some small gift each year on *our* day. Each year Mrs.

Bennington would send me a present and I would send her a card of thanks. But one year I was slow with my thank you note and Mrs. Bennington wrote me a letter explaining that she didn't have to send me presents on my birthday and that if I failed to say thank you for those presents there was a good chance that I would not receive any more. It was a good lesson that I try, not always successfully to remember.

Saying thank you is not only about good manners. It also can be about better health. Dr. Amit Sood at the Mayo Clinic writes: "Ever wish there were a magic pill you could take to boost your energy levels, improve your mood, help you sleep better, increase your kindness and even help you make more money? Unfortunately, no such pill exists, but there is a way you can reap these benefits — without a visit to the doctor's office.

"The secret? A daily gratitude practice. Indeed, counting your blessings each day has been shown to significantly increase your happiness — and your physical health. In addition to helping you get more sleep, practicing gratitude can boost your immunity and decrease your risk of disease."<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Sood offers some tips to get us started: Keep a gratitude journal and write in it every day. Use gratitude cues by posting pictures that make you happy or using post it notes to reinforce feelings of gratitude and make a gratitude jar—ask everyone at home to write one thing that they are grateful for everyday and drop it in the jar. During dinner or some time together, take out a couple of notes and share them.

"The goal is to move your mind from thinking about gratitude occasionally to making it second nature. Eventually you'll lower your gratitude threshold so that you're grateful for little things—and you'll learn how to sprinkle a little gratitude throughout your day."<sup>2</sup>

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts...And be thankful. Today I am especially thankful that amidst all the problems we face right now, we still can gather and celebrate what we have in common. Not that many years ago, we would not have done what we are doing tonight, but here we are. We gather as Catholics, Episcopalians and Presbyterians, and probably some others who got invited along to join this motley crew. We gather with choirs from our respective churches. We gather as people representing all the surrounding schools—Archmere, Sanford, Tatnall, AI, Tower Hill, Friends, Sallys, Ursuline, Padua, the Charter School—who have I left out? We are all here. We are Republicans and Democrats and Independents and maybe we could show the rest of the country that we actually can talk with each other across those divides, and respect each other, even love each other. We all, amidst our differences and all that we hold in common, we all gather today to give thanks.

Some years ago, Fr. Henri Nouwen, the Dutch priest, published a journal from his experiences in Peru and Bolivia. He called it *Gracias!* and explained in his conclusion that the title "summarizes what I found, learned and heard. The word that I kept hearing, wherever I went, was: *Gracias!* It sounded like the refrain from a long ballad of events. *Gracias a usted, gracias a Dios, muchas gracias--* thank you, thanks be to God, many thanks! I saw thousands of poor and hungry children, I met many young men and women without money, a job, or a decent place to live. I spent long hours with sick, elderly people, and I witnessed more misery and pain than ever before in my life. But, in the midst of it all, that word lifted me again and again to a new realm of seeing and hearing. "*Gracias!* Thanks!"

"...And slowly I learned. I learned what I must have forgotten somewhere in my

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Amit Sood, at <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/improve-health-practice-gratitude/art-20270841>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

busy, well-planned, and very 'useful' life. I learned that everything that is, is freely given by the God of love. All is grace. Light and water, shelter and food, work and free time, children, parents and grandparents, birth and death--it is all given to us. Why? So that we can say *gracias*, thanks: thanks to God, thanks to each other, thanks to all and everyone."<sup>3</sup>

I pray that you all experience a joyous Thanksgiving, without any punches thrown, and that your discipline of gratitude will continue beyond Thursday to include every single day going forward. Clothe yourselves in love...let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts...And be thankful.

Let us pray: Gracious God, before we ever learned to say thank you, you were already giving. Our gratitude does not match your generosity, but we are grateful. For all your gifts, including the gift of your very own life to us, we give you thanks. Help us to develop a new discipline and joy of thanksgiving, not only this week, but every day of our lives. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Henri J. M Nouwen, ¡Gracias! A Latin American Journal. © 1983 Harper & Row