

Thankful Living

Late in the afternoon on Thanksgiving Day, Scott Spencer was out in the yard finishing up some work on the fence when he noticed a man walk by and stop in front of the house. By the poor condition of his clothes and appearance, Scott knew this was someone who was down on his luck and needed help. The man called out, “Is there something I could do for you in exchange for a meal? I haven’t had anything to eat today.” Intrigued by this request to be of service to someone, not just expect a handout, Scott suggested he help rake the leaves on the front lawn, bagging them for removal by the city crew the next day. Together, the two made short work of the job and went inside for dinner.

Having freshened up in the bathroom, the man was grateful to share the delicious Thanksgiving meal with the family: toast turkey and stuffing, mashed potatoes, turnip and pumpkin pie. The man was treated like an honored guest, serving him first. Talk around the table was about life in general, not prying, but just making conversation. He was relaxed and happy to be invited to be a part of this special event.

When the meal was over, the man put on his coat and thanked everyone for such great hospitality. As he turned to leave, he burst into tears. He couldn’t remember the last time he had a hot meal like that, let alone be invited to eat with such a kind and caring family. The Spencer family never saw him again. But what they did from then on was to set an empty chair and an extra place setting at the table every Thanksgiving dinner. Perhaps God would send someone else their way as an opportunity to practice the Christian principle of thankful living.

The apostle Paul wrote, “No matter what happens, always be thankful, for this is God’s will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.” (1 Thessalonians 5:18) Having a time to focus on being thankful is especially needed in today’s challenging times, so let’s consider what that means.

1) Thankful heart

In our gospel reading, Jesus’ taught about one attitude that can damage thankfulness in our hearts. “So I tell you, don’t worry about everyday life – whether you have enough food, drink, and clothes. Doesn’t life consist of more than food and clothing?” (Matthew 6:25) Worry is overanxious fear about events that we may or may not have any control over. It robs us of peace of mind and directs our attention away from the One upon whom we need to place our burdens. The prophet Isaiah wrote, “Don’t be afraid, for I am with you. Do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you. I will help you. I will uphold you.” (Isaiah 41:10)

The difference between worry and concern is that the latter can move us to do something, if possible, to improve our situation. In 1986 a toddler in Midland, Texas fell down an abandoned well and landed unharmed on soft earth. Immediately, rescue teams put their skills to use and had the child out in a matter of hours. Concern over the health of the youngster led to action that resulted in thanksgiving for a successful conclusion. No doubt there was worry on the part of the parents, but they led the call to mobilize community and keep up hope. That’s the essence of a thankful heart – knowing where to turn for help and trusting that things will work out according to God’s will.

In his letter to the Philippian church, Paul advises, “Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. If you do this, you will experience God’s peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can

understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:6-7). Just like Jesus concluded his teaching, “So don’t worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” (Matthew 6:34)

Let’s not mistake being ‘thankful’ with ‘thanksgiving’. The latter is usually associated with giving thanks for an abundance of food, drink, clothing and other possessions. There’s nothing wrong with giving thanks for these things – and we should - but thankfulness goes a lot deeper than just appreciating the material things of life. It’s about abiding in a relationship with God who wants a heartfelt, ongoing walk with us where we delight in his presence, realizing how much he does for us each day in grace and mercy. It’s about being thankful in all of life’s situations, whether we see them as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, as everything that happens has meaning in God’s overall plan for us. It’s about an attitude that colors everything we do, one of positive assurance as Jesus said, “Your heavenly Father already knows all your needs, and he will give you all you need from day to day if you live for him and make the Kingdom of God your primary concern.” (Matthew 6:32b-33)

2) Thankful focus

So far, we’ve learned that Thanksgiving isn’t so much about “feeling grateful” for things or for particular blessings such as food and love of family, but rather a way of looking at life where God is at the center. It’s about the most essential relationship in our lives. It’s about reminding ourselves that God needs to have first place, that the burden of control and management isn’t ours but his whose capable hands are far better at it than us.

Thankfulness from a biblical perspective focuses on God. It reminds us that we’re dependent on God for our present lives and our future eternity. God isn’t some ‘add on’ to our

day, but the most essential part of who we are and can be. It's the relationship which is reflected in the focus of our lives, as David rejoiced in the Psalm, "You are my God, and I will praise you! You are my God, and I will exalt you! Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good! His faithful love endures forever." (Psalm 118:28-29)

3) Thankful living

When 19th century author Charles Dickens toured America, he lectured in a number of cities. Around Thanksgiving time, he mentioned his belief that "people are mixed up about this holiday. Instead of only one day a year to be thankful and the rest to gripe and complain, we need to live Thanksgiving 364 days and leave that last one for what we shouldn't be doing anyway!" Good advice for us in an even more materialistic society than what Dickens saw in 1870.

Thankful hearts and thankful focus should lead to thankful living every day. Protestant reformer Martin Luther wrote in his catechism, "everything needed for this life, such as food and clothing, home and property work and income, a devoted family, an orderly community, good government, favorable weather, peace and health, a good name, true friends and neighbors comes from God's good and gracious will to give them to us." This wonderful blessing of confident expectation of God's provision is the answer to the first petition in the Lord's Prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11). No wonder the prophet Joel in our Old Testament reading was so amazed at God's bounty, "Be glad now and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things. Once again, you will have all the food you want, and you will praise the Lord your God, who does these miracles for you." (Joel 2:21,26)

There's an old legend about an evil king who ruled with an iron fist every corner of his subjects' lives except for one – their firm belief in God. He just couldn't convince them otherwise, so he summoned his advisors and asked for ideas how this could be changed. "Hide

God on the far side of the moon,” said one. “Hide God in the deepest ocean,” said another. “Hide God in the everyday events of peoples’ lives,” said a third, the wisest elder in the council. The king was delighted with the elder’s words, and to this day, people are still searching. That shouldn’t be the case for us as followers of Jesus. God’s presence is primarily found in life’s moments where God breaks into the ordinary and makes each moment special.

Johnny was a mentally challenged young man who worked bagging groceries in a supermarket. He enjoyed receiving compliments on a job well done and wanted others to have that same feeling, so he got his dad to help him type out a positive “Thought for the Day” on the computer, print out 300 copies for him to put into customers' bags. It wasn't long before the regulars started coming back to his line just to see what the next day's “Thought” was. In no time at all the line at Johnny's check out was three times longer than at the others. The store manager noticed this, and encouraged other departments to find ways to boost customer satisfaction.

Two weeks later, things were happening all over the store. When a flower stem got broken in the floral department, an employee pinned it on a customer rather than throwing it in the garbage. Gift trays of meat or fruit were tied with ribbons rather than delivered in plain cardboard boxes. And compliments on the transformation spread well beyond the walls of the building. It seemed like everyone was benefiting from this renewed effort to serve.

That’s what thankful living is all about – recognizing opportunities to make a difference in the lives of others. It starts with a thankful heart focused on God’s presence and work with us, knowing that as our needs are supplied, so will the needs of others – and we may be the means that God uses for that to happen. Let’s be open to the Spirit’s movement and say like our Psalm, “Yes, the Lord has done amazing things for us! What joy!” (126:3) Amen.