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Joel 2: 21 – 27
1 Timothy 2: 1 – 7Psalm 126
Matthew 6: 25 – 33

Happy Thanksgiving! If we were to play a word association game, and I said, “Thanksgiving!” what would pop out of your mouth first? Food? Football? Family? Parades? Shopping? Not ready yet? This particular holiday, which is both sacred and secular, is so loaded down with nostalgia and legend, expectation and tradition, that it begins to look like most of our dinner plates just before we dig in for the first time. But what if we remember that Thanksgiving was a verb before it was ever a noun? So what in our word association, we linked Thanksgiving with “giving thanks?”

As important as it is to our sense of American history as we think it happened, it might surprise you to learn that Thanksgiving, was not regularly observed on the 4th Thursday of November until a former Vestry member of St. Thomas Parish in Washington, D. C., turned president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, made it so in 1939, near the end of the Great Depression. A time of extreme hardship for many in this country. But perhaps FDR realized something important.

Giving thanks is central to our practice as Christians. In fact, our main Sunday service is known as the Eucharist, which is Greek for “thanksgiving.” And one of the things we always say as part of it is “All things come of you, O Lord; and of your own have we given thee.” It’s a reminder that everything that we need is provided to us by our magnanimous God. At Thanksgiving, in late November, we celebrate the particular God-given gift of the harvest – ‘all is safely gathered in’ as the one hymn sings. Harvesting a crop is all about faith in God, and God continuing to provide for us. In 1939, when FDR proclaimed the 4th Thursday of November officially Thanksgiving, perhaps he realized that what Americans needed most at that moment (and at every other moment) was to take a step in faith. To acknowledge the Giver of All Good Gifts. To celebrate the God of Abundance and Fruitfulness. To have faith that God would continue to provide, even in the face of destitution and all evidence to the contrary for many people.

The 1930’s, rather like now, were a time of deep anxiety. Jesus addresses our anxiety in his words from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. “Do not worry about your life,” Jesus says. Easy to say, Jesus, but how does that really help? For those worrywarts among us, doesn’t that just heap on the guilt? Jesus’ words don’t seem very helpful when looking at a table full of bills, or an empty chair at the table, or a longer to-do list than hours in a day. Anthony de Mello, a Jesuit theologian, suggests that instead of nursing our worries, we change our focus. That we look beyond ourselves and our own self-absorption. That we cultivate a grateful heart.

That seems almost too easy, doesn’t it? Just become grateful and we won’t have to worry about anything? Gratitude doesn’t come easily when trapped in the depths of despair, or in the grip of anxiety. So perhaps it is a process of turning more and more towards gratefulness - like sunflowers towards the sun. So start small. Be in awe of something so common and yet so beautiful, Jesus says, look down at your feet and see the beauty that God has bestowed to a blade of grass. And when you can truly appreciate that, then move on to something larger. Anything at all will do – a cat’s warm purr, a baby’s breath, an unexpected smile from a stranger, the sun breaking through a cloud. It is a small step to move beyond ourselves and to become aware of someone or something else in creation, and it is that small step that matters. A small step with huge results. Because it gets us to see, eventually, that everything comes from God.

Living thankfully, another writer says, is not essentially about ‘feeling thankful’ or even ‘being thankful.’ To live thankfully is to *act* differently day by day because we are compelled by the Holy Spirit to participate in the abundant, generous life of God-with-us, Emmanuel, Jesus. Our grateful hearts draw us to a different perspective on life that is not self-focused, but other-focused. To be thankful and to be grateful are not the same. It is akin to the difference between happiness and joy. It is easy to be polite, and say “Thank you” and go on in a rather superficial kind of way. It is another to feel gratitude well up from within for the smallest and largest of reasons, and then to act on that gratitude. Gratitude is active, not passive – we give thanks by practicing it through hospitality, generosity, stewardship, and compassion. They are spiritual practices that ground us in the graciousness and providence of our God and enable us to grow and live into that image. When we keep on practicing them, they become who we are – we become lives of thanksgiving.

May Thanksgiving be not just a day or a noun, but a verb in the continuous present for each of us. May we be so infused with gratitude that it becomes “Thanks-living” and as much a part of us as the breath of God. +