

THANKSGIVING AND MEALS

a sermon by

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Galveston, Texas

November 19, 2006

Text: "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

1 Corinthians 10:31

Yesterday morning I had occasion to travel over the causeway to the little town of Houston. Our Presbytery of New Covenant was meeting at the St. Andrews Presbyterian Church. With a good bit of time in the car, I took advantage of the great reception of Houston's radio stations.

Surfing up and down the radio dial, I found a variety of programs. There were the obligatory sports-talk programs, there were cooking programs, and there were fitness programs.

All of these programs included discussions about the week upcoming. Some programs wanted listeners to know about the games to watch throughout the day. Other programs wanted listeners to know what and how to cook the food to be consumed throughout the day. Then there was at least one program that wanted to caution listeners about the 3,400 calories consumed during the meal.

This week our nation will slow and pause for a moment of thanksgiving. Millions of people are expected to travel more than 100 miles from home for at least some of the week. Airports are issuing travel advisories. Retailers are preparing for a record-breaking crush.

This is a wonderful meal – but not just any meal; this is our Thanksgiving Dinner.

I.

There is a wonderful witness to our traditional Thanksgiving. In this, we at once receive a tradition, participate in this tradition, and we hand the tradition to those who come after us.

This tradition of setting aside an ordinary day – of taking a day from the busy-ness of life for the business of gratitude – is older than our nation itself.

In the annual Proclamation, the President writes, "The Thanksgiving tradition dates back to the earliest days of our society, celebrated in decisive moments in our history and in quiet times around family tables. Nearly

four centuries have passed since early settlers gave thanks for their safe arrival and pilgrims enjoyed a harvest feast to thank God for allowing them to survive a harsh winter in the New World.”

George Washington, acting on the request of the Congress, was the first of our Presidents to set out an autumn day for the work of thanksgiving. In 1789, President Washington did this by issuing a Proclamation. The President’s words are among his most famous.

“Whereas it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits, and humbly to implore His protection and favor....” President Washington then set a day “...to be devoted by the people of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being who is the Beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be; that we may then all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks for His kind care and protection of the people of this country previous to their becoming a nation....”

This tradition-in-the-making lay dormant for more than 70 years. President Abraham Lincoln was the next of our Presidents to find reason enough to give thanks.

In what some saw as this nation’s darkest night, President Lincoln was able to find the light of the hope that we have in God. So, in 1863, President Lincoln renewed the tradition and called upon our nation to give thanks.

“The year that is drawing towards its close, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature, that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever watchful providence of Almighty God.”

After writing of the blessings poured upon this land, the President revealed even more of his faith.

“No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy.”

President Abraham Lincoln set an excellent example. The nation was devastated by the terrible war. In the midst of this national grief and crisis, President Lincoln charged our people to “pray for Widows, Orphans, Mourners, and Sufferers.” As President Lincoln petitioned those who have come before us, so too should we ask of the Lord, our God, “Move your Divine Hand to heal the wounds of the nation, and restore it as may be consistent with your Divine Purposes.”

Our Thanksgiving tradition is rooted deeply in the history of this nation. But our celebration is more than the recognition of an historic event. This week we shall ourselves participate in this tradition as we pause and to give thanks. That’s why Thanksgiving is such a popular topic of discussion in a wide variety of radio and television programs. Virtually every household in this country – regardless of their religious affiliation or their household income – will celebrate Thanksgiving Day.

Of course, our modern traditions may barely resemble the first Thanksgiving meal of some 400 years earlier. Our modern tradition includes widely broadcast sporting events – mostly collegiate and professional football. This past week, many people noted with sadness the death of the former University of Michigan football coach, Bo Schembechler. The New York Times published a tribute that quoted Schembechler as saying, “Football is the American game that typifies the old American spirit. It’s physical. It’s hard work. It’s aggressive. It’s kind of a swashbuckling American sport. Football is not going to die. It is our American heritage.”

The particular details of the Thanksgiving observance, celebration and meal may have changed. But, by participating in this event, we continue to teach our children important lessons about life and about our identity. These lessons are found in the memories that will last a lifetime and perhaps even be passed along to the generations that come even after them.

II.

The work of passing along our identity by passing along many of our traditions is important. The necessity of this work must not be discounted. We live in a world that is filled with many, many choices. The children of our community know little, if anything, of a world where right is easily discernable from wrong. This is true the world over and it has been true for quite some time.

About 25 years ago, a British politician quipped, “The choice in politics isn’t usually between black and white. It’s between two horrible shades of gray.” Some politicians see only the varying shades of gray, and so are blinded to the occasional absolutes that are around us. But, there are others, who see life *only* in terms of absolutes. In a best-selling book, Dr. Mary Pipher describes adolescent girls in this way.

“Teenage girls are extremists who see the world in black-and-white terms, missing shades of gray. Life is either marvelous or not worth living. School is either pure torment or is going fantastically. Other people are either great or horrible, and they themselves are wonderful or pathetic failures. One day a girl will refer to herself as ‘the goddess of social life’ and the next day she’ll regret that she’s the ‘ultimate in nerdosity.’”

For many people – dare I say, “*most people*”? – we live in a world of ethical relativism, “...the belief that nothing is objectively right or wrong and that the definition of right or wrong depends on the prevailing view of a particular individual, culture, or historical period.”

This rationale is founded on the principle that any idea of “right and wrong” is limited only to a particular context. What is right in one culture may be wrong in another. What is wrong for some people may be very right for others. In this mindset, each of us, as an autonomous individual, has the right to make certain choices without review by, or criticism from, any one else.

So consumed are we by the sight of ourselves that we have lost vision of the greatness of the Lord our God. This problem is not with the Lord, our God. This instead is a problem within each one of us. C.S. Lewis struggled with this tension in an essay entitled, “Difficulties In Presenting the Christian Faith to Modern Unbelievers.”

“The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defence for being the god who permits war, poverty and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God’s acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the Bench and God in the Dock.”

Incidentally, the modern people described in this essay were officers in the Royal Air Force in 1948. Though written more than a half-century ago, Lewis’ words remain absolutely true today.

III

This excessive individualism, this complete dependence on the fuzzy logic of moral relativism, this begs the church for a response. The work of passing along our identity by passing along many of our traditions is important. The necessity of this work must not be discounted.

The church, as the Body of Christ, has a wonderful opportunity to respond to the questions, the doubts and to the misguided notions of our world. But, the church’s response is diminished by our own willingness to side with the popular opinions of our world.

Not all that long ago, one particular theologian, Karl Barth, wrote to provide corrective instructions to the church. We speak of Barth and his theology as being “neo-Orthodox.” Writing at the end of the First World War,

Karl Barth and others were working to guide the church between the errors posed by what was then called “liberal theology” and “fundamentalism.”

Barth hoped to guide the church through a middle-way, a way guided by scripture and faithful to our traditions.

In 1962, Karl Barth made his final trip to the United States. This landed him on the cover of Time magazine and made him the subject of the related article.

“To Barth, theology cannot be free speculation ; it is correct only when it is obedient to what God says. Hence there can be no theology apart from prayer, and no theology apart from God's revelation. The revelation of God is a continuous act: God still speaks to man through the words preached by his church to those who accept Christ. Since this revelation continues within the body of those who witness to God, there can be no theology apart from the church and what it believes.”

What, we must ask, is an appropriate response by the church? How can we be obedient to the voice of our God? At yesterday’s meeting of the Presbytery, there was an opportunity to hear Glenn MacDonald. He is the author of The Disciple Making Church – a text that is being used in our Seekers adult Sunday school class.

In his book, MacDonald writes of the critical need for each of us as Christians to have someone to whom we can turn for wisdom and guidance. This, he says, is our “Barnabus.” MacDonald also writes of the responsibility and importance of allowing ourselves to be that role model for another. This, he says, is our Timothy.

The importance of our Christian role models has very much been on my heart and mind throughout this week. When contemplating the possibility that God was calling me into the full-time, ordained service of the church, I looked to other pastors for their insight. As a student at Union Seminary I continued to be guided and strongly influenced by another pastoral role model, Ben Lacy Rose. Throughout his life, Dr. Rose had been a pastor, a military chaplain in combat and a seminary professor. Not long after his retirement, Dr. Rose agreed to preach at a small country church for a period of no more than six months. So, for the next six months, Dr. Rose preached to the 19 members of that church. At the end of the six-month commitment, he agreed to stay on, but only for a short time. About 15 years later Dr. Rose was still preaching to that little church. But, over time, it had become a congregation of nearly 200 members.

For two years I was a student minister, assisting in all aspects of the life of the church. Dr. Rose held very clear and strong opinions about the life of the church – about worship, and about the ways that ministers are to conduct weddings and funerals. I was not his only protégé. Dr. Rose made a point of passing along the wisdom that he had acquired through his 70 years of ministry. For example, Dr. Rose would teach his ideas of sermon preparation by saying, “It takes about 20 seconds to get an idea, 20 hours to get up a sermon from scratch and 20 minutes to preach it. If it's longer than that, nobody is going to want to listen....”

This fascinating man, a friend and mentor, has been on my mind because this past week, at the age of 91, he passed away. Reflecting upon my relationship with Dr. Rose, I know that I am an heir to a wonderful witness of faith and ministry. This man invested his time and energy in a young student. He did this not for personal gain, but for the glory of God. For his investment, I am a better person and a better pastor.

The New Testament reading speaks of exactly that model for ministry. The Apostle Paul was writing to the church in Corinth. That group of Christians found themselves divided and feuding over ... well, over everything. Some people said that, as a matter of conscience, Christians were forbidden from eating certain foods. Others believed these prohibitions to be misguided. For some within those factions – the boundaries were very clear; black and white. For others of their day, the world was not given to extremes. To them, the world was filled with many, many choices. They knew little, if anything, of a world where right was easily discernable from wrong. These people were the early practitioners of ethical relativism and fuzzy logic.

Our televisions, our radios and our news outlets are now filled with all of the advice deemed necessary to survive a Thanksgiving holiday; including rules of etiquette and stories of families' traditions. But in these hours of scheduled lessons, something is missing

The Apostle Paul is very clear that each of us is to be deferential to the others around us. "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

In these words we may find the most important advice and a wonderful tradition for this week.

END NOTES