

RETURNING THANKS

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Some scholars say that first Thanksgiving Day celebrated in Massachusetts in the fall of 1621 may have been inspired by our Jewish ancestors who, four days after Yom Kippur, celebrate the holiday of Sukkoth. "Sukkoth" is the Hebrew word for "booths" and refers to the temporary homes that were used by the Jewish people as they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years.

Sukkoth also marked the end of a long harvest, the time of the year when farmers and their field hands finished their work. To celebrate their hard work, the farmers and their families would go to the temple in Jerusalem to offer thanks. They built temporary buildings, as instructed by the Torah, to remember how the Hebrew people lived in tents while they wandered in the desert.

Sukkoth is also one of the pilgrim festivals, when the Jewish people celebrate nature and agriculture. In earlier times, people went to the temple in Jerusalem to give thanks to God for their harvests.

It was the time when they gave the first part, not the leftovers, not the second best, not what was convenient, but the first part, the best portion, intentionally saved, deliberately put aside, sacrificed, to honor God, and to help them remember that all they had, everything they owned, every blessing they enjoyed came from God.

Today Jewish people all over the world celebrate seven or eight days of Sukkoth. It is a mitzvah, or a religious obligation, for every Jew to build and spend time in a sukkah

During the festival, so this custom has been honored and passed from one generation to another for thousands of years. Sukkot is a festive holiday characterized by hospitality. In some communities, people go from sukkah to sukkah, looking at each other's decorations, and sampling holiday treats. It is a time to celebrate, remember, and give thanks to God for the blessings of the year.

Even though their new life was probably very difficult, those early Americans had much to be thankful for – especially their first harvest in their new land. Like the early Israelites they had been seeking religious freedom for many years. So began the tradition that gathers us together this week-end.

If we were asked this morning to make a list of everything we are thankful for this Thanksgiving Sunday, we would probably all be very mindful of our spiritual heritage and the importance of God in our lives. But if some roving reporter stopped us at the shopping mall tomorrow and ask, "What are you particularly thankful for Thanksgiving?" there is a good chance we would name our health, or our children and grandchildren, or our land of plenty, or a good job or any of a dozen other things, and never think to mention God or Jesus. Would that be right?

When the word Thanksgiving is mentioned, we tend to think of it in terms of a cornucopia of blessings –“amber fields of grain” and “purple mountain majesties” a table loaded with turkey and sweet potatoes and pumpkin pies, a healthy, happy family gathered together in the dining room, a home filled with the warmth of an open fire and cheerful, lifting voices, a good bank account to support everything, and enough position or status in the world to satisfy our personal needs. “Count your many blessings” runs an old hymn, “name them one by one; count your many blessings, see what God has done.”

But what about the person who has come upon hard times and doesn't appear to have much to be thankful for? Is that person left out? Suppose it is someone facing surgery for cancer. Is this a time to be thankful? Suppose it is someone who will be eating Thanksgiving dinner alone because the dearest person in his or her life died six weeks ago. Will that person feel thankful? Or may it's someone who has recently lost a job and the coming holiday season is hardly a cause for rejoicing. What is the basis for this person's thanksgiving?

The people in the reading from Jeremiah are living in exile, separated from their homes, family, friends and neighbors. Imagine how hard it would be to give thanks if we were isolated from family, friends, neighbors and relationships, left feeling like a stranger in a strange land. How would we return thanks.

Then there are the lepers in Luke's story. They are isolated and living in exile because of their illness. What would it look like, how would it be to return thanks in this situation?

The same Bible that tells us these two stories, reminds us that there are two levels of thanksgiving open to us. One is the level of thanksgiving for the provision of life – for food and shelter and interpersonal relationships and all that. The other is a deeper level of thanksgiving for our relationship to God. The first is important the Bible says, but it is not nearly so important as the second, for our relationship to God is the most important gift in life. “Bless our God, O my soul,” said the Psalmist, God's “steadfast love” is “from everlasting to everlasting.” The Hebrews word *hesed*, here translated “steadfast love” is the word most frequently used to express God's loving kindness to the Hebrew people through the ages. God gives us everything we need, said the apostle Paul, so that we in turn are able to supply the needs of others; but at the base of everything God gifts us with is Jesus, who, though he was rich, became poor to bring us into richness. Wherever we make our lists, therefore, in the church or in the shopping mall, the first gift we ought to remember in our thanksgiving is God's steadfast love for us, a love that was brought to life in Jesus.

The Israelites in exile experience the steadfast love of God through the prophet Jeremiah who sends a letter, a word to the community. In that letter he relays the word from Yahweh. In exile, the community is to build houses and live in them, plant gardens, have children and seek the welfare of the cities where they live. To seek the welfare of the city is to seek their own welfare. In other words, continue to live as before, I am with you. Stay here and prosper. It was kind of like Jeremiah saying “give thanks to God for what you have, and when you do that you will feel better about what you have.

The lepers experience the steadfast love of God through Jesus who welcomed, spoke with, ate with all those who were different because of their culture, their work,

their place on the social ladder. In today's story Jesus healed both Jews and a Samaritan thus demonstrating the love of God is for everyone.

On this Thanksgiving week-end, first and foremost in our Thanksgiving thoughts are what we often refer to as the fruits of creation, the fruits of harvest, the produce that the spring planting has created. Oh, I know we are a people of 'buts' ...but the price is poor... but we can't sell our cattle...but the cost of production is astronomical...but the drought continues...;yes there are the downsides and that is troublesome and problematic; however a few short months ago all the indicators were that there would be 'no' pasture, 'no' haycrop, 'no' harvest to put in the bins; and yet I hear of people who do not have bins enough to store this years crop in. Ah, that we might give thanks for what is, for what is, is far greater at this moment, than what isn't... Truly are lives are good.

On this Thanksgiving Sunday and on any Sunday, for all Sundays are a thanksgiving time, there is the focal point, there is what some would call the 'crux' of the matter. We say thanks for the stuff, however beyond that and greater than that is for us to say thanks for our God being present in us, with us, and for us. If our God was not present, there would be no one/nothing to return thanks to.

And so rather than berating the nine people, in our story, who didn't give thanks, let's celebrate that one of them did. Rather than being hard on the nine who didn't realize that a word of thanks might be appropriate, let's lift up the one who did.

There are time when we might forget to say thanks but rather than being harsh on ourselves for the nine times we might forget to say our thanks, let us rejoice for the times we do remember and let us rejoice for doing so is good and doing so brings healing.

In closing I would like to invite us to return thanks for God not just to God

If it was not for our God's presence we would not appreciate the brilliance of these fall colours as we do.

If it was not for our God's presence we would not appreciate the variety of shapes and sizes we do.

If it was not for our God's presence we would not appreciate the importance of a good harvest as we do.

If it was not for our God's presence we would not appreciate the companionship, the caring, the love of another as we do.

If it were not for our God's presence we would not celebrate the birth and the baptism of Sydney as we do.

If it was not for our God's presence, we would not covenant with Helen and Penny as we are going to do.

If it was not for our God's presence we would not know of God let alone know God and be known by God.

Bless our God, blessed is our God. Let us be thankful Christian people, for truly our lives are good!