

# Community Thanks

Psalm 136; Matthew 25:31-46

Faith Mennonite Church, Minneapolis

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Thanksgiving is a national holiday in the United States, primarily associated with football and shopping. In fact, in 1941, just before Pearl Harbor, the date was changed from the last Thursday in November to the fourth Thursday, so that in some years, like 2012, when November had five Thursdays, the Christmas shopping season would be a week longer.

In the Talmud, Jewish commentary on the scriptures, we hear, “Whoever tastes of this world without saying a blessing—that is, offering thanksgiving—commits unfaithfulness. My own conviction is that the essential Christian virtues are two: gratitude and love of enemies.

We teach kids to say “please” and “thank you.” But gratitude is more than words. The familiar words of Micah 6:8 read, “What does the Lord require of us but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.” We often refer to the first two, but it might be good to think also of the third. Much of our lack of justice and kindness come from the sense that I deserve anything I have, because it is simply the result of my own efforts. We often have little gratitude or appreciation—perhaps even awareness—of what we have received from family, friends, church, culture, tradition, ultimately God. We assume we have controlled our lives and created ourselves.

Six and a half weeks ago I received a new, titanium hip. I live in the United States, have health insurance, have access to doctor and hospital. Am I any better, or more deserving, than those stricken by Ebola in Liberia or Sierra Leone or Guinea, places with far less medical care?

I am retired. Between pension, Social Security, and a little other income, I am in the most comfortable position financially I have even been in. This provides opportunity to experience joy in giving in gratitude for what I have. I suspect that a similar sense of gratitude was behind the noisy fun at the auction of pies at “Peace, Pies, and Prophets” last weekend.

One benefit of gratitude is the reminder that the world does not depend on our efforts alone, however important we may be. You and I are part of God’s hope for the world, but none of us is indispensable.

Central to our gratitude to God is our sense of community, expressed in our internal life as a congregation and in our concern for life beyond our congregation. We are here to help our neighbors as well as ourselves. Key to this is not a sense of duty—what we should be doing—but such a sense of relationship with God and others that we act without thinking.

“He is a glutton and drunkard and a friend of sinners and tax collectors” (Matthew 11:19). Liberal and conservative students of the Gospels disagree on many things. One thing all agree on is that these were real charges against Jesus: Central to the stories about what Jesus did and the stories Jesus told about the kingdom of God, or life lived as God intends—the heart of which, according to Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, is neighborliness—is eating, feasts, banquets. “The truly toxic atheism is the assumption that neighborliness is an elective in a world of acquisitiveness” (*Journey to the Common Good*

[Westminster John Knox, 2010]). Food is rightly central to faith. God desires people to be together.

This is a theme running through the Bible. The creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2 are not really about the age of the earth or the gender of human relationships; rather they are about the unity of humanity and God's desire to be friend to her creation. Through the Bible we find pictures of God in a marriage relationship with people of faith, the Jewish people and the Christian church. Certainly that image has been misused as support for male domination, but at heart it simply is saying that we are made for loving relationships with God and one another.

I have chosen for scripture today Psalm 136 and a parable from Matthew 25. The psalm is a litany of thanksgiving for God's blessing in nature and in history. We can see it as an individual's expression of thanks, but it is clearly intended as a corporate response to God's faithfulness. We gather weekly as a community—and often as members of this community in between Sundays—to be reminded that we are, first of all, a community of thanksgiving, of gratitude.

The parable of the last judgment is a fairly familiar story. There are troubling elements—in the end some are condemned and there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” We are uncomfortable with pictures like that. They are reminders that life is serious, that we are always making choices with weighty results. C. S. Lewis, reflecting on this dilemma, suggests that anyone in hell can get out—if he or she really wants to.

One of the striking things about this story is that neither group—neither those praised nor those condemned—had thought much about what they had done or left undone. Rather, they had just done what came naturally, or without thinking. Or, to put it another way, this story is less about what they did or did not do, but about what kind of people they were. Those who ministered to those who were hungry, those who were thirsty, those who were sick, those who were naked, those who were in prison, simply sensed that they were connected to those who were in need, that they were part of the community, their family, and that they were able to help others, not from duty, but simply because that is what grateful people of God do.

People who honestly, joyfully, and gratefully pray Psalm 136 become the kind of people who live Matthew 25, please God, and meet the needs of the world, whatever they may be. May we be such a people.

Hermann I. Weinlick