

We Give Thanks
Sermon 204 | Greystone Baptist Church | November 19, 2023
Matthew 14:13-21

This week we celebrate Thanksgiving which kicks off the big holiday season and means many of us will soon travel to be with friends and family. For many, this season is marked with anxiety about what exactly those gatherings will entail.

Will there be space for everyone?

Will there be enough money to afford the gifts and the food?

Will there be good conversation and catching up, or will everything devolve into conflict and chaos?

Despite our worries, there will be plenty to distract us from these relational pitfalls. There will likely be more than enough food, there will be Black Friday sales, and there will be lots and lots of football to take our minds off of all the more controversial things.

That is, unless you have a house divided on rivalry week. My house is not divided on this matter, we will be cheering on the Wolfpack from Carter-Finley Stadium.

Though the Thanksgiving holiday is not technically about football, the rivalry week tradition is pretty old... 150 years old to be exact. Yes, 150 years ago, the Princeton Tigers and Yale Bulldogs met on Thanksgiving Day in Hoboken, New Jersey, surrounded by 5,000 fans. In just 10 years, the crowd grew from 5 thousand to 40 thousand fans which signaled to the world that this rivalry game, hosted on neutral territory, on Thanksgiving Day was a terrific (or at least very marketable) idea. Some reporters have even called it "the greatest sporting event ...this country has to show."¹

As folks swarmed to the New York metro area for the football game, students and fans gathered in Times Square for tailgating and celebration. Though many of them arrived in horse drawn carriages, their tailgating party in midtown Manhattan marked the beginning of another Thanksgiving Day tradition: the massive New York City Parade. It wouldn't become known as the Macy's parade until the 1920s, but the start of the parade tradition was born from the popularity of the rivalry game between Princeton and Yale.

Since those earliest years, both the football game and the parade have kept us all coming back time and time again - searching for a large-scale, communal experience of joy. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the first Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade and it would be the 100th parade if not for the three year hiatus between 1942 and 1944. Resources like helium and rubber were needed for the war effort and couldn't be spared for unnecessary things like parade balloons. But every other year, the parade has carried on - just like the football games - for one hundred years.

¹ Melanie Kirkpatrick, *Thanksgiving: The Holiday at the Heart of the American Experience* (New York: Encounter Books, 2016) pp. 99-102. Retrieved from Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful*, loc.1729.

With thousands of participants and hundreds of thousands of in-person spectators, with millions more gathered online and on TVs, this annual gathering is one of the largest, recurring, public celebrations in modern history. It's near-constant presence *even* in times of struggle and scarcity have been a welcome and joyful interruption to the challenges we have faced as a people.

This is what festivals do, they draw us out of ourselves and into community where we remember the past held by our tradition,,we look forward to the future with hope for better days to come, and we share in gratitude for all that is in the present. *We. Give. Thanks.*

But Americans are not the only people to participate in Festivals, to mark time as it moves from month to month, from one celebration to another, and to depend upon these traditioned gatherings to pull us out of our deepest depressive states. *Remember April of 2020 when people were calling for it to be Halloween and then Thanksgiving, and then Christmas (already) ?* We rely on our festivals to bring us joy, to bring us levity, and ultimately... to bring us together.

And we are not the only ones to do so, in fact, people of every race, nationality, and religion have turned to these moments of shared celebration to transcend whatever hardship is most present at the time. The rhythms of life in ancient Judaism were framed by three significant festivals: Passover, Pentecost, and Booths, all of which celebrated freedom and abundance.

It was customary for the Israelite people to travel to Jerusalem, leaving behind the responsibilities of work and the comfort of their own households, in order to join the festivities in the city. Their act of "leaving behind" was not just about a fun trip to the big city, but it was an embodied journey, one that provided physical space and spiritual space for God to show up and provide for them once again. God's provision marked the nature of ALL the festivals and was a distinct reversal of other ancient relationships between gods and people.

In other ancient religious traditions, similar festivals occurred but the people brought offerings in hopes that their gods would be grateful to them and their devotion; perhaps in hopes that their gods would reward them out of gratitude. But for Israel and Yahweh, the offering of gifts happened in the opposite direction. The people arrived empty-handed, God provided, and "the people responded in gratitude with promises to live more deeply in love and the law."²

These Jewish festivals which framed their liturgical year were reminders of God's provision and humanity's grateful response. These festivals were "intended to produce the emotions of humility, joy, and gratefulness to remind the Israelites that *their* community was

² Diana Butler Bass referencing Walter Brueggemann in *Grateful*. Loc. 1673.

grounded in generosity and gratitude, completely dependent upon the gifts of a good God.”³

In this way, the festivals offered the possibility of a different way of life, one in which “all other claims, pressures, and realities [could] be suspended.”⁴ These ancient celebrations and festivals modeled an alternative way of living, one that was both a reminder and an example of how life *should* be, grounded in God’s gifts, and humanity’s gratitude.

I wonder what kind of church, what kind of community ours *could* be if we grounded our lives in God’s gifts and our gratitude?

Today’s Gospel reading brings us to a shore lined with a crowd of people who have followed Jesus as he attempted to steal away to a deserted place. Jesus must have been grieving as he had just heard the news that his friend and mentor, John the Baptist, had been murdered in Herod’s palace. There were also rumors about Jesus’ relationship with John and that connection alone meant that Jesus’ life was now very much in danger. Deep in grief and with every reason to be afraid, Jesus and his disciples retreated.

There, on that remote shore, and seeing that the crowds had followed them, the disciples began to worry about the lack of provision. They came to Jesus with a plan to send the people away, back into town to buy their own food. But Jesus said no, *you* feed them. This gospel doesn’t tell us where the food came from, but what it does say is that the meager supply of loaves and fish that the disciples found in their possession did not seem like enough.

“Bring them to me,” Jesus directs the disciples; and in a scene that unfolds much like the Passover table - or our communion tables - Jesus looked up to heaven, blessed the bread, broke the bread, and then gave it to the disciples who in turn served the gathered crowd. The people came and God provided. Surely, *this* was a moment of shared gratitude. When a whole crowd of people witnessed a miracle. When out of sheer scarcity came magnificent abundance. Surely, the people, upon seeing the leftovers - 12 baskets full - raised their voices and recited the psalm (136):

*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
His steadfast love endures forever.*

And if it was so, did the memories of God’s provision and God’s presence from the Egyptian Exodus to the meal that was before them now, did it all come rushing back over them, did it result in a spontaneous outburst of collective joy? What was the *vibe* like there on the shore that day as the crowds ate until their bellies were full? Was it exuberant? Was it loud? Was it lively? Was it like a makeshift festival right there on the shoreline as

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid. loc.1687.*

the people who left everything behind received the gifts of their *good and gracious* God, and responded with gratitude?

You know, it seems rather strange to me that though these stories frame our understanding of the Gospel, most people would not describe the church experience as a festival, with a touch of exuberance or lively gratitude flowing freely amongst the joyful...

And yet, "That is [*precisely*] what the church is intended to be," writes Diana Butler Bass, "a festive community dependent on gifts of abundance.

Everything [here] is a gift.
Bread is a gift; wine is a gift;
life and joy are gifts.

[gifts] No one can ever pay back.
[and yet] *God never withholds.*

All we can do is receive - in awe of such favor and grace -
say thank you to the Giver,
and then 'pay it forward' with humble service to others."⁵

Still more often we find ourselves like the disciples who bring their gifts to Jesus saying: *Surely this isn't enough. Shouldn't we just send the people away.*

And still... despite these feelings and fears that are rooted in insecurity and scarcity, God is still meeting us here, providing all that we need, and showing us time and time again that it is *more* than enough.

This week, we will find ourselves around festive tables, as we gather to celebrate our national holiday called *Thanksgiving*. Though it is a national holiday and not a religious one, there is potential for us to intentionally leave behind the "claims, pressures, and realities" that stress us out, that cause division, and that alienate us from one another.

The day is called, *Thanksgiving*, and we now know that giving thanks *is* a Christian *ethic*. It is the appropriate response to the good many gifts we have received from God... the *abundance* we have received from God. So... What if we intentionally left all else behind and headed toward our Thanksgiving tables

- no matter their size or scope
- no matter who our dinner companions may be
- no matter if they met our expectations or not...

What if we approached the tables this year with more than *hope*... with *expectation* that God will meet us there.

⁵ *Ibid.* loc. 1792.

Turning any sense of scarcity into downright abundance and flipping our trials and tribulations into festival and celebration of God's goodness. God's abundance, and God's gracious presence.

After all, the festival is both a reminder and an example of how life *should* be, grounded in God's gifts, and humanity's gratitude. So how about *this year* we look beyond the food, beyond the football, and beyond the parade for our hope and our joy.

This year, let us simply go with faithful anticipation with soft eyes wide, enough to see that God is indeed *good*, all the time. Even here, even now, even tomorrow and the next day the same.

And let us start right now living life as it should be: grounded in God's gifts, and our gratitude.