

Recipe for Thanksgiving

November 23, 2008

Matthew 25: 31-46

Whitefish UMC

- † Each year the placecards that graced our Thanksgiving table grew a little more tattered, a little more stained with cranberry, gravy, and who knows what. By the time I had a child of my own, they were almost illegible.
- † My mother tells me I made those placecards in Sunday school when I was in third grade—the same year I received my Bible from our church. On each one was a verse from Psalm 100, which the children read so beautifully today.
- † At our Thanksgiving table, we were each given a verse to read as the prayer of thanks before the meal. It was part of our tradition, along with my grandfather's cranberry sherbet recipe, my grandmother's stuffing, and ice cream molds from Peterson's.
- † As Thanksgiving draws near, we're all blowing dust out of the gravy boat, digging out our favorite recipes, and doing what we do, each in our own family's way, to make it Thanksgiving.
- † Yes, Thanksgiving is about food, and I am happy to share Grandpa Dankers' cranberry sherbet recipe with you, but it's about more than that. Especially at this time of year, we're meant to take stock of our blessings and to say "thank you" to the Source of them all, our Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer God.

- † For some of us, it's easier to find things to be thankful for than it is for others. Our church family has experienced a lot of loss this past year. Thanksgiving tables will be missing important people. Others will include precious people whose lives have been impacted by serious illness and whose futures are uncertain.
- † And who can help but notice the increasing fear over our country's economic situation this Thanksgiving. The global financial crisis is beginning to be felt concretely here in our families. It's hard to celebrate abundance when we don't know what the next few months will hold for us financially. Will there be enough for us, for those we love and for whose care we are committed to provide?
- † Back during the days of the Great Depression in 1929, a group of ministers in the Northeast, all graduates of Boston University School of Theology, gathered to discuss how they should conduct their Thanksgiving Sunday services.
- † Things were about as bad as they could get, with no sign of relief. The bread lines stretched ever longer, the stock market had crashed, and the term "Great Depression" seemed an apt expression for the mood of the country.
- † The ministers thought they should only lightly touch upon the subject of Thanksgiving in deference to the human misery all about them. After all, what was there to be thankful for? But Dr. William Stiger, pastor of a large congregation in Boston rallied the group.
- † This was not the time, he suggested, to give mere passing mention to Thanksgiving—just the opposite. This was the time to put matters into perspective and thank God for the blessings always present, but perhaps forgotten, due to intense hardship.

- † And isn't it true that the most intense moments of thankfulness come not in times of plenty, but when struggles abound? Think of the Pilgrims that first Thanksgiving. Half of their number dead, many starving or ill—still they offered thanks to God. Their gratitude was not *for* something but *in* something.
- † It was in that same sense of gratitude that Abraham Lincoln formally established the first Thanksgiving Holiday in the midst of national civil war, when the list of casualties appeared to have no end and the very nation struggled for survival. How much more important, then, to give thanks that our hope lies in something greater than money, fear, and even death.
- † But then we are confronted with today's scripture lesson from Matthew's gospel. It's one thing to recite a Thanksgiving Psalm that evokes nostalgic memories of childhood. But it's quite another to hear these words of judgment from Jesus.
- † How, then, are we to combine a sense of thanksgiving to God with these harsh words? For this is one of those years in which the Christian calendar collides with the secular one.
- † Today is the last Sunday of the Christian year, known as Christ the King Sunday. Next Sunday we begin a new church year with the first Sunday in Advent—even before the turkey leftovers are fully consumed. But today we are meant to acknowledge that Christ—Lord of our lives—will come again, and his kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven.
- † In the past few weeks, we've explored Jesus' parables about the kingdom that he told near the end of his ministry on earth. They haven't been particularly pleasing or easy stories to hear. Feckless

bridesmaids are left out of the party. Cautious servants are banished into outer darkness.

- † And now this story of judgment from a king who will separate the proverbial sheep from the goats. In our Wednesday morning Bible study, we've been reading the last few chapters of Matthew's gospel and applying them to our own lives. The twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth chapters hold some fearsome statements about the end times that many of Jesus' followers expected to occur in their lifetimes.
- † We're told to be ready, to stay awake, to invest our lives wisely—for we don't know when we will be called upon to account for our lives. But what are we supposed to do to be ready, to be assured of the master's favor?
- † Now if you're like me, you struggle with the idea of a God who is all-loving, invites everyone into the divine circle and to the Lord's table but then passes judgment on those who accept the invitation.
- † Yes, there's tension, even contradiction here. But Jesus does invite absolutely anyone who will eat with him to come to his table. The invitation to the messianic banquet is open to all—"the good and the bad," in the words of Matthew 22:14. In that sense, we are all invited to experience salvation without precondition.
- † But what is this salvation? Both Jesus and Paul saw it not as merely a promise of a blessed afterlife: salvation is something that starts today, and it's about a certain kind of life—specifically a life in community. And it's not just any community, but a family.
- † Jesus says that anyone who hears God's word and does it is his sister or brother or mother (Mark 3:35). Jesus gives us an invitation to relationship—with one another as much as with him and with the God

who created us. Jesus' invitation to us, his ragtag band of disciples from all nations, is to join God's people.

- † Once we join this beloved community, which is a foretaste of the kingdom of heaven, how we choose to live together affects the quality of our life now. Will we reward only those who do something for us, spend time only with people who can improve our bottom line?
- † But the coming of God's kingdom is like this: we'll be shown that a way of life that counts only the well-connected and outwardly successful as worthy of our attention is really hollow and even painful. And we'll also be able to know that a life in which "the least of these" are included is so much more joyful and abundant.
- † The invitation to feed the hungry, quench the thirsty, clothe the naked, comfort the sick, welcome the stranger, visit the imprisoned is for us not after we die. It is an invitation for this moment, this day, this generation. And it's not just about avoiding punishment.
- † "What we do, the extent to which we respond to Jesus' invitation not just to come into the House of God's chosen people, but to live as one of the family, in relationship with and caring for the rest of the family as for our own flesh and as for the Body of our Lord, is the extent to which we experience eternal life, God's just and peaceful kingdom, right here and now." (Sarah Dylan)
- † Let's close with this poem from Steve Garnaas Holmes' beautiful poem, "The Reign of Love,":

God is not removed in heaven;

God is incarnate in vulnerable humans.

Born in a manger, among the poor.

'Found in human form, humbled even unto death.'

*In the most humble and lowly, most vulnerable,
most weak and despised and rejected.*

'A man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.'

*Why do we look for God among the saints,
among the successful, the victorious?*

God is among the defeated, downtrodden.

There is nothing sentimental about this.

*God is pouring love into those who don't deserve it,
who won't receive it, who don't believe it.*

Christ dies on the cross because Christ lives on the cross.

Dare to be with him.

If you want to see love, go where it is being poured out.

If you want to receive love, go where it is undeserved.

*If you want to see the Lord enthroned, sovereign,
ruling in mighty power over all things,*

triumphing over all evil,

then feed the hungry. Welcome the stranger.

Visit the prisoner.

Watch love defeat the powers that try to stop it.

*If you want to enter the Kingdom of God, the Reign of Love,
then love. And you will be there.*

† There it is. Better than my Grandpa's cranberry sherbet, even though it's wonderful. A recipe for Thanksgiving in which we are invited to a

heavenly banquet that includes us all and begins when we love one another as if we were loving Jesus himself. Because we are.

† Happy Thanksgiving. Amen.

Sources:

Steve Garnaas Holmes, “The Reign of Love,” *Unfolding Light*, an email daily devotional.

Sarah Dylan, www.sarahlaughed.org

Brett Blain, “In All Things Be Thankful,” www.sermons.com