

A PURITAN THANKSGIVING SERVICE

The Gifts of God and The Praise of God's Providence

Preached by Rev. Seth D. Jones – November 21, 2010

Today, we celebrate Thanksgiving Sunday. I organized the service as an homage to the early Puritan services, which were intended to be simple, informative and celebratory, rather than complex, unintelligible (in Latin, for example) and somber. In the same manner, I thought it would be a good exercise to write a sermon in the style of the great preachers of the Congregational tradition, particularly Jonathan Edwards and Charles Grandison Finney. This style was quite popular during the 1600s and into the First Great Awakening, with the great preacher George Whitefield and others. It presupposes that logic and reason are the primary imperatives for conversion, so the sermon reflects a logical exposition of a particular point. So a premise was asserted, followed by several (usually 3) points of proof or reference, with several corollaries to the primary points, followed by an application. That is what I have attempted below.

PREMISE

Like Job, it is our responsibility as people of faith to praise God for the gifts we have been given, regardless of the present state of our affections or circumstances. The constant work of faith is, therefore, to remember in the good times that God is the source of all the gifts and good which is present in one's life. This is made a difficulty since it is our base nature which desires to claim to itself all those things which are in fact God's. When we are in the best moments of our lives, often we wish to seek ways to claim personal responsibility for those moments.

Contrarily, the constant work of faith is to remember in the bad times that God is the source of all which has been made available for one's survival, meager though it may be. This is made a difficulty for it is our base nature to reject and remove ourselves from our relationship to God by holding God responsible for all that is currently going wrong. When we are in the worst moments of our lives, we likewise seek to reject any personal responsibility for our present situation and at the same time reject the providence of God within the difficulty. Thus, in a desire to not participate in the fallenness of humanity, Job, in the midst of his affliction, says to his wife,

"Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips" (Job 2:10).

Today, I therefore suggest, as we approach the day of Thanksgiving, that the gifts we have been given in our lives, regardless of our present circumstances, singly and presently, are founded upon God's sole and holy providence and God's love for us, as expressed in the work of His Only Son Jesus Christ. These gifts

motivate us to seek out God in God's great Creation, and upon our recognition of the source of those gifts, calls us to praise God for God's care and provision unto us.

I will impress the first of these spiritual realities – that the gifts we have received are found solely upon God's providence and love – in 3 ways:

1. That Our Lord and Savior has given us the gift of *seeking God*.
2. That Our Lord and Savior has given us the gift of *the desire to please God*.
3. That Our Lord and Savior has given us the gift of *an abundant and full life*.

Based upon those gifts I will show how those gifts are related to our praise of God in the following 3 ways:

1. That God's Providence is shown in Jesus Christ's *seeking and finding of us*.
2. That God's Providence is shown in God's *work already done for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ*.
3. That God's Providence is shown in Jesus Christ' *spiritual feeding and nurturing of His flock for the sake of a fulfilled and abundant life*.

1. That Our Lord and Savior has given us the gift of *seeking God*.

The human creature which God has formed out of dust is composed of an inquisitive and curious spirit which spans the globe with her questions and constant seeking of the meaning in all things. How we determine the meaning and value of a thing is itself a proof of our need to seek out answers and how much more so do we need meaning when we are questing after those aspects of the self which constitute the spiritual realm. The created order, if one is humble enough to encounter it on its own terms, consistently points us toward the presence of God. God, of course, is not nature, but rather nature reflects the Spirit of the Lord, just as the “spirit of the Lord moved upon the waters” (Gen 1) in the very beginning. That Holy Spirit has also inspired us to seek after our Creator and the Source of our Being.

To that end, we are given a certain capacity of reason and discernment whereby we can come closer to the truth of things in this material existence. The abdication of that reason and discernment, therefore, is at once an offence to the created order and also to the One who created that order. We are driven then to seek God in all ways and in relation to all things.

As the Prophet tells us,

“Seek the Lord while He may be found” (Is 55:6).

It is certainly clear also that our seeking can often lead us astray. Even the disciples were not immune to missing the direction in which the Lord lies, influenced as they were by their experience, their culture and even their religion.

“Do you fail to understand?” Jesus tells them in the Gospel of Mark. And again, *“Do you not yet understand?”*

The disciples often thought concretely and materially, rather than spiritually, and as a result, perceived what they sought only on those material terms. The gift then is the desire to seek God. Our responsibility to that gift is to seek God with discernment and reason.

2. That Our Lord and Savior has given the gift of *the desire to please God.*

Psalm 37 tells us to *“take delight in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.”*

It goes without saying that the desires of the heart are molded and formed by God *a priori*, which leads to even more desire to take delight in the Lord. Once we are seeking God, we begin to experience and understand the nature of this God in which we seek, this One who cares for us as an eagle cares for her young or a lioness for her cubs. The care and love of God awakens within us the desire to please the One who cares and loves us, just as a good-hearted child seeks to please her parents in all she does. This also should be seen as the gift from God it is, for those who do not know God will therefore begin to see the works of God in the actions of those who seek to please God. The desire to please God, therefore, is part of God's greater plan to have all peoples bend their knee at the name of Jesus in heaven and on earth and under the earth (Phil 2:10).

As Paul tells Timothy, this greater plan is from God's desire that *“everyone be saved and come to the knowledge of truth. For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all...”* (1 Tim 2:4-5).

The gift of this desire to please God, to do the works of God, is subject to the same reason and discernment as our seeking after God. God's grace flows out and through all of Creation upon the Cross of Christ and therefore precedes and goes before all our actions and works. It is precisely because of this prevenient Grace we have the desire to please God at all. So let us not be confused as to the nature of our work for God. It is a work out of *desire for what has been done for us*. It is a work which recognizes what has first been given for us. The gift is the desire, and our desire is to honor the Giver of the gift.

3. That Our Lord and Savior has given the gift of *an abundant and full life*.

Our Lord Jesus Christ tells us in the Gospel of John,

“I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture...I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10).

God does not wish God's children to suffer. Suffering is an experience which is the coalescence and condition of our broken relationship with God, and by Christ's own admission contrary to what was intended for our lives. By Christ's work for and with us, by the presence of the Holy Spirit, our continuing sanctification into a life in Christ seeks to reverse the experience of suffering for the sake of the gift of abundance.

In this season of Thanksgiving, we on this singular holiday, live into the abundance of God's desires for us, surrounded as we shall be by family and friends and food. Would that our material abundance of food translate into a spiritual abundance of sustenance and nourishment for all people. For the rest of the year, after this great day of celebration, however, many live either in a state of real or perceived scarcity. By our justifications and self-interest, we seek to weigh the scales of need toward our personal needs and away from those with even less than we have. We behave as if there is never enough, but the reality is God has in fact given those who *have* the power and ability to provide for those who *do not have*. Material hunger is therefore a failure of human will and imagination, a failure to adhere closely to the culmination of our gifts of the desire to seek God and the desire to please God. An abundant and full life is not truly such a thing unless all those who surround us also participate in that abundance.

It is this abundance which we celebrate in our Lord's Supper and also in our offering each week. By the abundant gifts of God we participate in the abundant gift of God in God's self. For us, as Paul tells the Corinthians,

“God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.”

So we see by following the path which God has imbued us with - our desire itself to seek God - we are led to desire to please this God who would have us seek Him. In seeking and pleasing our Lord, we are led into a perception and experience of abundance which only has meaning when that abundance, material and spiritual is shared and given to others.

For these gifts, then, we are shown in various ways that we are to praise and give thanksgiving to the Lord who has so generously provided for us. Even our Puritan forerunners sought to praise God for God's abundance in their gathering after their first winter in Plimouth Colony. This abundance by God was recognized and praised even while the mourning of the deaths of half the colonists were still fresh on their minds and as the soil itself loosened for the burial of their loved ones in the coming warmth of spring.

With regard to our praise of God:

Firstly, we praise God for God's providence in Christ's *finding us*. We seek God as a constant and present gift of God's mercy, but the fundamental truth of the matter is that God really finds us. Just as a child lost in the wilderness may seek her parents amidst the trees and fauna, it is more likely the parents who know the forest well enough to find the child. While the child seeks, the parents find. Just as Jesus finds Nathaniel under the tree, just as he finds Peter and Andrew casting nets as they seek fish, so also God finds us as we seek out God. Our praise of God therefore is in being found by God. The gift is one of seeking; our praise is the praise of being found by God through the movement of the Holy Spirit in our deepest being.

Secondly, we praise God for God's providence in *God's work already done for us in Christ's death and resurrection*. As was said before, our desire to please God is fulfilled by what Christ has already done for us on the Cross. In Christ's death and resurrection we share in the great project of building God's kingdom. So we must recognize that our works for God are not to gain approval by God so we might be saved by our works. Rather, our works are pleasing to God because Jesus Christ and Christ's atoning work are pleasing to God. *That* is the work we share and participate in when we do the works we are called to do by God. So it is to Christ's glory our praise is raised when we see the presence of God in those good things done in this world, whether those good things are done by us or others. The good works are not *for us* now (those who hold Christ close to their hearts and minds and souls), but rather *through us*, so Christ might be made present and known to all peoples and all creation.

Thirdly, we praise God for God's providence in Jesus Christ's *spiritual feeding and nurturing of His flock for the sake of a fulfilled and abundant life*. Just as God provided for God's people in the desert by giving them manna, so Christ feeds us spiritually. In the act of communion, it is Christ's spiritual body in which we are partaking and thereby we are fulfilled and emboldened to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ's abundant gifts to each of us.

Indeed, Jesus tells us today,

"I am the bread that came down from heaven" (Jn 6:35,38).

Christ is the bread of eternal life, of spiritual fulfillment. This is not perishable bread, like the manna was perishable. The manna in the desert would disappear every night and if it was kept, it would be rotten the next day. The bread of Christ is constantly present and ever abundant and for this we should constantly praise the Lord.

APPLICATION

I pray you do not hear any malice when I say to each of you that the disciples' struggles are our struggles. The disciples wish to perceive Jesus' statements about bread and life as concrete and literal, just as the woman at the well believes Jesus to be speaking of literal and concrete water.

Christ is instead teaching us to differentiate between what is material, the common and simple elements of bread and water, from what is spiritual, the “living body” and the “living water” of Jesus Christ eternally and spiritually present for us as our true nourishment and sustenance in the world. So as we seek God in God's Creation, we must always recognize that God's material provision is always imparting to us a spiritual truth of a greater and more sustaining provision. In our thanksgiving, then, we are not only giving thanks for those things which are materially present for us, but also for the spiritual reality which God is drawing us toward within those things.

In our desire to please God and in God's work for us through Jesus Christ on the Cross and in the Resurrection, the same discernment must be active. God's work precedes our work, and contrarily, our acceptance and reception by God through Jesus Christ is not dependent on our work for God. Rather, *our work for God is completely dependent on our preceding reception by God through Jesus Christ*. Thus, all our activity becomes a thanksgiving and a praise of God's abundant gifts to each of us.

We praise then, on the coming day of Thanksgiving, our capacity to know Who truly feeds us, Who truly cares for us. In our praise, we honor the gifts of God to seek God, to please God and to have a full life because of God. In our praise, we see in our gifts the providence of God in God's finding of us, lost and broken as we are; the providence in God's work for us through Jesus Christ on the Cross and in the Resurrection, thereby turning all our works into acts of thanksgiving; and the providence of our spiritual nourishment through all the Holy Spirit would have us know and all the Holy Spirit would have us desire in our service to Jesus Christ, our constant Lord and Savior.

Amen.