

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, November 19, 1989, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

PSALM 103:2

“Bless the Lord, Oh my soul, and
forget not all His benefits.”

THE CHRISTIAN MEANING OF THANKSGIVING

We have assembled here this morning as a Christian congregation, even though we give thanks with the larger community of mankind, for thanksgiving is an elemental virtue which is not limited to Christians. One evidence of the universality of thanksgiving is the very fact that Thanksgiving Day is a national festival, not simply a Christian festival.

To be sure, it is not an unchallenged national festival! When George Washington proclaimed the first Thanksgiving Day in 1789, two Southern Congressmen objected, saying that the people had nothing to be thankful for in the new government, and that even if they did, the President and the Congress had no right to tell them when and where they should give thanks! And a Congressman from South Carolina said that he did not think very much of this mimicking of European customs anyway! And it is reported that Washington was somewhat disappointed in the use to which the festival was put. When Jefferson was President he continued this Southern opposition to Thanksgiving Day, so that a New England clergyman once prayed for him thus: “Oh Lord, endow the President of the United States with a goodly portion of Thy grace, for Thou, Oh Lord, knowest that he needs it.”

But Thanksgiving had too deep a hold on the people, and it survived, and today we have our Thanksgiving, in spite of the fact that the Society for the Advancement of Atheism petitions the President annually not to proclaim the day.

I hope you will all read carefully President Bush’s first Thanksgiving Proclamation. It is an excellent expression of gratitude to God. When we lived in Philadelphia the President’s Proclamation was always printed on the front page of The Philadelphia Inquirer, but in 19 Thanksgivings here in Washington I have never once seen the Proclamation even mentioned in The Washington Post. That is one of the many reasons that I do not subscribe to that journalistic monstrosity.

However, in anticipation of this national festival we have gathered here as a Christian community; so, let us take our Christian faith seriously and let us ask, this morning, what special significance Thanksgiving has for us as Christian believers.

1. We thank God first of all for the wonder and, the mystery of our human existence.

One modern writer, Humphrey Lee, declares that the most devout thanksgiving he ever heard was from the lips of an old man in a country church, brow-beaten by his wife, broken in business, suffering from ill health. He gave his testimony in a Thanksgiving Service such as this,

where individuals were explaining, often at great length, their many reasons for thankfulness. The old man finally arose and stated his case in one sentence - "I am thankful," he said, "that I am alive." Well, he could have said nothing more profound than that. Here is the simplicity which is always profundity, and the kind of profundity with which children frequently confront us. It is a simplicity that went to the very heart of the matter. "I am thankful," he said, "that I am alive."

As someone has said, "Life, even the hardest life, is the most wonderful thing in all the universe." A man alive, a woman alive -- the most wonderful and also the most mysterious thing in all the created universe! Think of the wonder and mystery of human personality. Did you ever realize that the most awesome, wonderful and mysterious thing in all existence is the power of someone to love someone else? And next to love, the most wonderful thing is the human brain, with its power to understand the universe, its capacity for thought and language and memory! Certainly, the old man went to the heart of the matter when he said, "I am thankful that I am alive"!

And yet, can we be thankful that we are alive if this is all that we can say? Trouble comes to each of us at some time or other; for as the Scripture says, "Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward." On this Thanksgiving Sunday, we must remind ourselves that life can be terribly hard and stern. Is there anything for which a man can be thankful this morning as he sits by the hospital bed of his wife who is dying of an inoperable cancer? Is there something for which a person whose life has been wasted in tragedy and defeat can be thankful this morning?

When a man dies in atheistic Russia today, it is as though he had never existed. In theory, there is nothing to grieve for because there is no soul, just an accumulation of chemicals. And by the same token, there is nothing to hope for -- death becomes a kind of nasty and final joke played upon the human personality by the physical universe.

What a refreshing antidote to such bleakness is the old prayer of General Thanksgiving used for 400 years by the Episcopal Church, which puts the Christian faith so briefly and yet so surely:

We bless Thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; But above all, for Thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.

It is only because we believe that God loves us with an everlasting love, and has visited and redeemed His people in Jesus Christ, that we can, this morning, be enthusiastic about His other gifts.

Well, God has given us life with its mystery and wonder, but He has done more than this.

2. God has placed us in a land of abundance amidst a world of incredible poverty. In comparison with the overwhelming majority of mankind, every person here this morning is unbelievably rich. It is hard for us to comprehend the extent of our wealth. Recently someone suggested that it becomes clearer to us if we imagine that the population of the world is 1,000. Of

these 1,000 people, 60 will be Americans. These 60 Americans will have one-half of the world's income, 15 times as many possessions as the remaining 940 combined. The solemn fact this morning is this: except for the 60 Americans, and about 200 of our mythical 1,000 people who live in Western Europe and belong to the privileged classes in certain other nations, the other 75% of mankind is poor and ignorant and hungry and sick. And thus, it is with good reason that certain theologians have suggested that the really great moral dilemma of our time is the behavior of a Christian who, in the providence of God, has been placed in a land of abundance amidst a world of incredible poverty. And we are to be thankful today for the abundance with which God has surrounded us. The creation of God is good, and we ought to enjoy it, and yet, as Christian people, remembering our incredible wealth, we cannot help but be uneasy this morning as we give thanks for it.

For one thing, we know that our incredible wealth is a great temptation to the conceit that our own abilities and skills have gotten us these things. We have certainly a right to be proud of the industry and the hard work and the achievement of the American people; but we must never forget that our wealth is ultimately God's gift. Ours is a land clothed with great forests, endowed with broad plains and fertile soil, blessed by abundant rain, stored with incredibly valuable natural resources, crisscrossed by broad and navigable rivers, and protected by wide oceans which enabled the nation to develop in her formative period, free from the wars and dynastic struggles of other countries. This vast area is set in the Temperate Zone which has cradled all the mighty empires of history, and it furnishes, in its great expanse, that variety of climate which is best for the development of man.

Surely the words of Deuteronomy speak to our situation: "Take heed lest you forget the Lord your God... lest when you have eaten and are full, and have built goodly houses and live in them... then your heart be lifted up... and you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth'" (Deuteronomy 8:11ff).

Then too, we know as Christian people that there is something finally ironic about giving thanks for food and shelter and clothing, if this is all we give thanks for. We do not exactly live by bread, no matter how important bread may be for those who do not have it. But sooner or later we all die by bread. Stocks and bonds, lands and money, food and clothing are not the really important things in life, for over these the sentence of death has been irrevocably passed, and to them God promises no resurrection. And thus, this morning, if we are to talk seriously about the goodness of God, let us talk about something more than bread, no matter how important bread may be.

Interest in faith raises yet another disquieting question about our wealth. Why is it that we, in the providence of God, have been placed amidst all this abundance, while most of the world is in poverty? What does this mean? How can we make sense out of this situation in a world which is governed by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? Now this brings into focus our central concern, and it is the third point I wish to make:

3. We must see thanksgiving and ourselves this Thanksgiving Sunday in the light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. How are we to understand our own lives and the abundance which surrounds us, and for which we give thanks, in a world in which our Lord is

the ultimate disclosure of reality?

This comes sharply into focus if we play a little game -- "Let's pretend." Let's pretend that you have not been born, but that you will be born somewhere on this planet today. And let's estimate your chances of being born as you were born. Well, the chances are very slim. You would have one chance in 22 of being born in the U.S.A. You would more likely be born in India, and if you were born in India, your chances of survival to maturity would not be too good. You would have only one chance in four of being born with a white face in a world where it goes hard with a man if he has a colored face. And the chances are overwhelming that you would be born in the midst of poverty and hunger and disease. Well then, why were we born as we were? Why were you born in the U.S.A. when the chances were so much greater that you might have been born in Africa or India or Tibet or China? Why were we born into Christian homes and nurtured in the Christian faith? Why were we born with good minds and sound bodies in a world in which some folk are born with defective bodies and minds? Why am I the person I am and not someone else? Until we have taken this question seriously, we have never taken seriously the meaning of our own existence. And more than this, until we have taken this question seriously, we cannot really know the meaning of thanksgiving.

And when we have taken this question seriously, we simply cannot discover any reason why we are the persons we are, except this -- that God wanted us to be the persons we are. His eternal purpose lies behind our lives. But the question still persists -- how are we going to make sense of this purpose of God which lies behind our lives in the light of what we know of God's purpose for all mankind in Christ?

Dr. H.H. Fanner, in commenting on the story of the rich man and Lazarus, suggests that we just can't make sense out of our lives, we can't make sense out of the gross inequalities of human existence except insofar as we interpret the blessings God has bestowed upon us in terms of our responsibility for the Lazaruses of the world. In the story which Jesus told of the rich man and Lazarus, it is not stated that the rich man was sinful because he was rich. We can imagine that he had a good mind; and no doubt he was honest and a hard worker. And we can imagine that Lazarus, perhaps, had a weak mind, and was not industrious. Certainly, he was sick. But this is not the point. The point is that the rich man interpreted his wealth in terms of privilege for himself rather than in terms of responsibility for Lazarus. And the story tells us that he went to hell. The rich man's life simply did not make sense in God's world. The rich man never gave a reason in his life for the blessings which God had bestowed upon him; he was insensitive to the cry of the hungry and the outcast; and he went to hell.

And today there is some reason for suggesting that if professing Christians in wealthy America do not make sense out of living in a land of abundance in a world of poverty, then we too shall know the meaning of hell, both in this life and in the life beyond.

My task this Thanksgiving Sunday is to see God's purpose for my life in the light of His purpose for all mankind in Jesus Christ. And unless I do this, the blessings for which I give thanks this day will continue to be an intolerable burden for my Christian conscience.

You know that God has blessed you far beyond your deserving. Here is a small thing you

could do. Keep an accurate record of all you spend in your home this year on Thanksgiving and Christmas (and it will be a surprisingly sizable amount); and then give at least the identical sum for the relief of poverty and underprivilege both here in our own land, and in the pathetically impoverished countries of the world. If you promise in your heart just now to do that, then I am sure that by the grace of God you will know as never before the true meaning of thanksgiving; and better still, you will hear the words of our Savior Who is also our Judge:

“I assure you that whatever you did for the humblest of My brothers, you did for Me.” (Matthew 25:40)

“Bless the Lord, Oh my soul, and forget not all His benefits” -- and forget not, as blood -- bought believers, to share those benefits with others.

AMEN.