

Let Us Give Thanks

Hebrews 12:25-29

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on November 22, 2015]

I

The story is told of a monastery where all the brothers took a vow of total silence.

They were not to speak even a word to each other in the course of carrying out their daily duties.

There was, however, one exception.

Once every five years the brothers were allowed to speak two words to the abbot.

One day a new monk arrived at the monastery to begin his service.

After five years he went to the abbot's office to speak his two words.

“Food bad,” he said.

Five years later he returned to speak again.

This time he said: **“Bed hard.”**

After another five years he returned a third time.

This time his words were, **“I quite.”**

The abbot said, *“I'm not surprised. All you've done since you've been here is complain.”*

II

We live in a world that is full of complaining.

We hear it on talk radio and we see it on the cable news channels all the time.

Watch any of the cable networks—

CNN, MSNBC, FOX—

and you will find an endless litany of the sour,
the cynical,
the negative,
the complaining.

Listen to talk radio from just about any ideological perspective (except perhaps NPR) and you will hear it dominated by the angry,

the vitriolic,
the self-righteous.

We see it on the tabloid shows' constant dredging up of the worst examples of dysfunctional human behavior.

We find it in our politics—

as we complain incessantly about...

the sorry state of our government,
the erosion of civil discourse,
and the seeming inability of our leaders to address
the crucial issues facing us.

Is it any wonder that recent surveys have found that the confidence Americans have in all three branches of government is at an all-time low, with confidence in the US Congress at just 7%.

And now with a presidential campaign well underway, we hear an endless litany from candidates about how bad things are—

how America doesn't win anymore—

and how all we have to do to restore American pride and
prestige is bomb the hell out of ISIS,
build a great big wall to keep all the Mexicans out,
deport all the immigrants,
register all the Muslims,
and keep Syrian refugees out of
Indiana.

No wonder people are cynical and anxious and afraid.

But we can't help but wonder—has our nation been overtaken with an attitude of criticism and complaining?

Are we a nation of whiners?

From the seat of government in Washington to the local conversation in the barber shop or beauty parlor,
the foundation of so much that we value seems to be shaken,
and we as a people seem to be caught up in an epidemic of
cynicism and complaining.

III

In the midst of all this comes this marvelous text from the book of Hebrews:

“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe.”

Did you hear that?

We are being given a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

There is so much around us that is uncertain.

There are no recession-proof investments.

There is no certainty of avoiding life-threatening illness.

There is no totally secure employment.

There is no risk-free retirement.

There is no such thing as absolute homeland security.

Yet many people continue to strive for the things that are not sure.

They continue to play the game of “trivial pursuit” with life.

Somewhere along the line in our culture, we decided that what it takes to live a full and happy life is in short supply,
and we must rush out and grab it before it is gone.

The result is a society of compulsive consumers, compulsive children, compulsive workers, fighting for space, acceptance and love. (David M. Greenlaw, Pulpit Digest, Nov-Dec 1990, p. 63)

One of the great spiritual writers of our time was the late Henri Nouwen.

In one of his books, Letters to Marc about Jesus, he writes to his nephew in the Netherlands who apparently was beginning his adult life as a typical “yuppie” in that country. These are Nouwen’s words:

“...increasing prosperity has not made people friendlier toward one another. They’re better off; but that new-found wealth has not resulted in a new sense of community. I get the impression that people are more preoccupied with themselves than when they didn’t possess so much. There is less opportunity to relax, to get together informally, and to enjoy the little things of life. Success has isolated a lot of people and made them lonely...The higher up you get on the ladder of prosperity, the harder it becomes to be together, to sing together, to pray together, and to celebrate together in the spirit of thanksgiving.”

Why do so many continue in the pursuit of the trivial when we know what is to be valued in life?

In 1863, Abraham Lincoln issued his Thanksgiving proclamation, part of which sounds eerily contemporary:

“Intoxicated by unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us.”

Lincoln was not a theologian, but his wisdom cannot be questioned.

In a world where so many hunger for their share of the disappearing pie,
in a time when so many strive for what eventually crumbles,
what the book of Hebrews says is so important:

we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

Note that the apostle does not say, “We have been given.”

Rather, “We are being given.”

The kingdom is the continually offered gift of a gracious God.

IV

Since we are receiving such a grand and glorious gift, therefore,

“...let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe.”

Let us give thanks.

Martin Copenhaver writes in *The Christian Century* (Nov. 11, 2015) that no one is born thankful;

it doesn't come naturally to us.

(If human beings were born thankful, we would never have to nag our children to write thank you notes to grandma and grandpa for birthday and Christmas gifts, now would we?)

Copenhaver goes on to say that every time the Thanksgiving holiday comes around, we confront an irony:

the more we have, the less likely we are to thank God.

An abundance of material possessions does not necessarily create thankful hearts.

Sometimes it even serves to stamp out thankfulness.

“We live in a time of extraordinary abundance, but that hasn't led to greater thankfulness. In fact, another defining characteristic of our age is that we live with an extraordinary sense of entitlement. We have much, and for the most part we have concluded that we deserve all that we have and probably more.”

“True thanksgiving begins with humility, the humility to recognize that we did not create ourselves, that everything we are and everything we have is a gift.”

Arnold Bennett reminds us of this truth when he writes:

“You wake up in the morning and lo! Your purse is magically filled with 24 hours of the universe of your life. It is yours. It is the most precious of possessions. No one can take it from you...and no one receives either more or less than you receive.”

As Christians, we are invited to give thanks for the precious gift of life,
as we hope against hope to be a sign of the kingdom
in a fractured, fallen world.

Thursday we will gather around tables laden with food to offer our thanks to God.

But let me ask you—

will this thanksgiving observance be nothing more than a halfhearted nod to the Creator of all things,
just another excuse to stuff ourselves with turkey, dressing, and pumpkin pie,
while the TV blares out the football game in the background?

Will that be enough to sustain you throughout the year?

Will it be enough when the biopsy comes back positive?

Will it be enough when downsizing comes at work and you are forced onto the unemployment rolls?

Will it be enough when you stand at the graveside of a loved one and bid farewell?

Will it be enough when you find yourself staring into the abyss of the great unknown?

It will...if you remember that you are being given **a kingdom that cannot be shaken.**

V

In his book *365 Days of Thank Yous*, John Kralik tells of writing a thank-you note every day for an entire year.

It wasn't because he was feeling particularly thankful;
in fact, it was a low time in his life.

His small law firm was losing money and its lease.

He was going through a difficult divorce.

He lived in a small, stuffy apartment where he often slept on the floor under an ancient air conditioner.

He was middle-aged,
overweight,
and at the end of his rope.

Then, one day, he got lost on a mountain hike and didn't know how to get home. By the time he found his way down the mountain, he had a plan.

He would write a thank-you note each day for a year.

"My only problem," he writes, "Did I have anything to be grateful for? The way my life was going, I hardly thought so."

But he got started writing notes to the people close to him,
his family and friends.

Then it got harder.

"One day," he writes, "I just couldn't think of anyone to thank."

He stopped at his regular Starbucks, where the barista greeted him by name,
"John, you usual venti?"—and with a big smile.

John reflects:

“I thought, this is really kind of a great gift in this day and age of impersonal relationships, that someone had cared enough to learn my name and what I drank in the morning.”

So he wrote the barista a thank-you note.

And so it went...all through the year—
each day...a thank-you note,
each day...a day of thanksgiving.

Doing this changed the way he approached life
and even brought him back to church:

“I had considered myself something of an atheist for years, but I started going to this church. The music was plentiful, delivered with...genuine enthusiasm. The dominant message was that grace was still available. To everyone. Even to me. I can deal with that, I thought. Through the process of writing thank-you notes, I had developed the notion of being blessed with grace.”

Martin Copenhaver points out that the Greek word translated as “thanks” in the New Testament is the same word that is sometimes translated as “grace.”

The Greek *charis*, or “grace,” may define an act of giving or an act of receiving.

If giving, the word means “gift of unearned favor”;
if receiving, then the word is best translated as “gratitude.”

When you pray before a meal, are you “saying grace” or “giving thanks”?

Both, because it is the same Greek word, *charis*.

Living life with a thankful spirit
and a grace-filled heart
made John Kralik whole.

It does the same for you and me.

VI

In 1948 theologian Paul Tillich published a powerful book of sermons entitled The Shaking of the Foundations.

At the end of the first sermon (which bears the same title as the book), he wrote:

“...in these days the foundations of the earth DO shake. May we NOT turn our eyes away; may we not close our ears and our mouths! But may we rather see, through the crumbling of a world, the rock of eternity and the salvation which has no end.”

Sisters and brothers, this is what I would leave you with for Thanksgiving 2015:

we are being given a kingdom that cannot be shaken—
 day after day,
 month after month,
 year after year.

Therefore, let us give thanks.

Let us give thanks for the love of God—
 a love revealed to us on Calvary’s cross,
 a love that offers each of us
 unconditional acceptance and forgiveness.

Let us give thanks for the living presence of Jesus Christ—
 the One who sustains all of life.

Let us give thanks for the gift of the Holy Spirit—
 the ongoing source of comfort and strength in our lives.

Let us give thanks that we are being given
 a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

That kingdom is God’s gift to us here and now.

It is what enables you to...

Count your blessings instead of your crosses;

*Count your gains instead of your losses;
Count your joys instead of your woes;
Count your friends instead of your foes;
Count your smiles instead of your tears;
Count your courage instead of your fears;
Count your full years instead of your lean;
Count your kind deeds instead of your mean;
Count your health instead of your wealth;
Count on God instead of yourself.*

-Msgr. Joseph P. Dooley, Orefield, PA

All praise and thanks to God.

Amen.