

CREATING JOY!

I don't know about you, but I am having a very hard time wrapping my brain around the reality that Thanksgiving is this Thursday. No doubt some of that has to do with the fact that it is as early as it can possibly be this year. And some of it may be related to the fact that the commercial world of advertisements and shopping centers has already moved on to Christmas. But be that as it may, Thanksgiving, that most American of all holidays, is just five days off.

Over the years I have kept a file of comic strips and newspaper columns that are built around Thanksgiving themes. Often they point to the fact that we Americans tend to take our many, many blessings for granted.

Take a *Shoe* comic strip of a few years back. The Jeff McNally strip features a cast of birds, most of who work for a newspaper. One of them, a disheveled old guy named The Professor, is a real cynic. Seated at a lunch counter high in the treetops, he is in conversation with the waitress. "You should count your blessings," she tells the always complaining Professor.

"I do," he replies, "But lately I've had to resort to some creative accounting." (*The Record*, 4-23-99)

Or *Baldo*, which tells the story of a Hispanic family. Baldo, his Dad and his sister Gracie, are seated at the dinner table.

"Baldo," says his Dad, "Why don't you say Grace?"

"We already said grace."

"No we didn't!" says his sister.

"Yes we did!" says Baldo, "These are leftovers." (*The Connecticut Post*, 11-11-06)

How often, I wonder, do we do the same? How often do fail to really, really understand just how blessed we are? Travel writer Jill Schenschul said it very well, in a column in which she reflected on the many wonderful travel experiences she had enjoyed in the previous year.

"I'm no Donald Trump," she writes, but I do understand I have an embarrassment of riches. When you realize the most exquisite gift is being given you every morning when you open your eyes, you go through the day with a different perspective. When you realize that you have been given yet another day to do anything and everything, and maybe even just sit around and complain . . . you can't help but be thankful for life." (*The Record*, 11-22-98, T-4)

The ancient Israelites had much to complain about--their city had been destroyed, they had seen many of their loved ones killed, and they had been forced to march hundreds of miles across the desert, only to live in Babylonian exile. They had lost so much. If they grumbled a bit, who could blame them? They were homeless refugees. Finally, though, they had been allowed to return home. But what they found in their homeland broke their hearts. The city walls lay in ruins, the Temple had been destroyed. Homes and shops were nothing more than small piles of rubble.

Yet out of that sad state of affairs some were able to count what blessings they had. Among them, the prophet sometimes called Isaiah. He was able to look at life, and still find hope. And in the midst of sorrow and despair, he was able to speak of joy. He was able to imagine a day when they would rebuild their homes and live in them. He pictured a time when they would replant their vineyards and eat the fruits they produced. He was even able to see a day of peace. "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together . . ." (Isaiah 65:25)

Why, you ask. What was it that enabled the prophet to have such an attitude? What enabled him to have such a perspective? Two things, I would suggest a deep abiding faith in God, and a real sense of gratitude. For you see, when we live out of a sense of gratitude, when we count our blessings no matter the circumstances, we foster abiding joy. As writer Michael Foss notes, "Gratitude is the attitude of joy." (*The Disciple's Joy*, 93) Not necessarily happiness, but joy. That is, as Foss writes, "expecting to find God in this day." (*Ibid*, 27)

Sue Monk Kidd tells about a time she and her husband volunteered at a local shelter. As the manager showed them the dormitory, they noticed a man dressed in a ratty old green suit, and a bright yellow tie, walking from cot to cot, asking each resident if they wanted to see the blue scrapbook he was carrying. No one seemed interested.

The manager told them that the man's name was James. "He's one of a kind. A simpleminded fellow. Can't read or write. But he's kindhearted." (*Firstlight*, 64)

They went on through to the dining room, and didn't give James much more thought until after they'd served dinner. As they were leaving, Sue noticed James was sitting by himself in the lobby, holding his blue album on his lap. She was in a hurry, and tried to sneak past him, but he spotted her, and asked if she wanted to see his book.

Reluctantly, she sat down beside him. And as he turned each page, she became more and more convicted. There was nothing very fancy in the book. Common everyday objects, in fact. A fast food restaurant napkin, a bluebird feather, an old church bulletin. But each object brought a smile to James' face. And each object told a story. The napkin came from a restaurant where he'd eaten the best meal of his life. The feather, from a local park, where he loved to sit and listen to the birds.

The church bulletin was from a mission where he'd been made to feel at home.

On the bottom of some of the pages there were signatures. "They're all my friends," said James. One was from a man who'd gotten him some clothes, another from a woman who'd fed him a meal or two.

"Gradually," writes Kidd, "I understood. The album represented James list of blessings. Blessings he read and reread." (*Ibid*, 65)

Then, James pulled a chewed up bit of a pencil out of his pocket. He asked Sue if she'd sign a page for him.

"I felt the back of my throat tighten up," she writes, "'To my new friend,' I wrote, then signed my name and read the words back to him. His gesture was so soft I almost missed it. He brushed his finger across the words, as if caressing the thought. Then he stood up, tucked his book of blessings under his arm, and said goodnight." (*Ibid*)

James had far less than any one of us here today. Yet, in some ways, he may have had more. Because he had learned the importance of counting your blessings, no matter how small. He had learned how to create joy.

So has my mother. Most of you have heard some or all of her story. You know that my Dad is fully disabled, and that she has been his primary caretaker ever since he was struck down by a hit and run driver fifteen years ago. Mother can't go anywhere, or do anything, without making numerous special arrangements. It is hard to describe just how much work goes into his care, but the bottom line is he can't do anything for himself, and much of what he can't do, she does.

A little over a week ago I got a phone call from my sister, who lives in the same town as my parents. My mother had been feeling faint, and so she drove herself to the hospital to get checked out. (My siblings and I were aghast when we heard she'd driven herself! But that's my mother!) It turned out that her pulse was barely humming along at about 40, about half what it should be. So they scheduled an emergency surgery to implant a pacemaker. She was told later that if she'd waited one more day it would have been too late!

My brothers were both there for the surgery, and I booked a flight to go down last Thursday, to spend a couple of nights with her. I wasn't quite sure what to expect. But when I arrived, my Mom was her usual cheerful self. Don't misunderstand, she wasn't in denial. She is extremely realistic; she knows her life is filled with challenges. And now she has even more. Earlier I'd spent much of a day lining up extra help for her, and now things were going to be a bit more limited in terms of her independence. A bit more of her privacy was now eroded.

Did she complain? Did she grumble? Did she whine about how awful her life is? Not a bit—and if anybody has that right I'd say it's Connie Danner. No, she didn't complain at all. In fact, she spent most of her time talking about all the many ways she has been blessed. She mentioned my brothers, she talked about my sister, she went on and on about her regular helper Phyllis, she spoke of her pastor, she mentioned all her fellow parishioners and their many gifts of food, she marveled at the beauty of the fall colors as we took a drive through the Kentucky hills, she talked about how much she loves her cat and her house, she spoke with deep appreciation about the poetry of Homer . . . and as she kissed my father goodnight, she whispered, "You're my guy, you know." I know she counts him her greatest blessing.

Later, as we sat with coffee, another one of the things she counts as a blessing, that and her afternoon glass of sherry, I asked how she was doing. "You know," she said, "despite it all, my life is good." You see, my mother lives in a state of constant gratitude, and so knows deep, deep joy.

Sisters and brothers, we have a choice. We can count our blessings and make room for joy, or we can be miserable. We can complain about how Aunt Sadie always leaves lipstick on our cheeks when she kisses us hello, or we can be grateful that she cares about us so much. We can grumble that the stuffing is too dry or the gravy too greasy or we can be grateful that we have enough to eat. We can mutter when the kids get to the house an hour after they said they'd show up, or we can be grateful they are there at all. We can complain about leftover turkey the next day, or we can stop and say grace, thanking God for all the blessings of our lives.

Do you want to be filled with joy? Then begin by looking into your own existence and thanking God for whatever blessings your life may hold. You may have to look hard, but trust me, the blessings are there.

I close with one more comic strip.

A mother and her daughter are washing dishes. The daughter turns to her mom and says, "Don't you hate cleaning up?"

"Not really," says the mom, "Dirty dishes mean that my family enjoyed the luxury of food on the table and that they appreciated the meal I served.

The daughter looks thoughtful for a moment. Then her dad walks in.

"Mom's being thankful for dirty dishes," she says.

Her mother laughs. "Some blessings," she says, "Come in weird packages."

And so they do. Weird packages. Odd packages. Unexpected packages like dirty dishes. Or blue albums filled with seemingly useless stuff. Or the badly battered

and broken body of a bedbound old man. Our task in this and every Thanksgiving season, and indeed, throughout the year, is to be on the lookout for God and the blessings God brings. For they are there. Just waiting to be counted. And as we count them, we too will be creating joy.

**Amen
John H. Danner**