

## PURE THANKSGIVING

My oldest grandson Zachary just turned six. He loves Power Rangers, soccer, swimming in the pool and dinosaurs. He can tell you all about brontosauruses and triceratops and like most little boys his age, he thinks a T-Rex is the best of all. He gets itchy if he has to suit too long at school, and he already knows how to channel surf. He is, to use a phrase, all boy.

Maybe more than anything else in the world Zack loves to run errands with his Dad. Saturday mornings they hop in the car and off they go to make their rounds. They hit the grocery store and the bank, drop off a video and always pick up supplies for do-it-yourself at Lowes. And no Saturday morning would be complete without a stop at Dunkin' Donuts!

Earlier this fall, a couple of weeks before Halloween, they also made a stop at the Joann Shop to buy a costume. As they made their way down the aisle they passed a display of special candies for trick or treat, and a whole row of plastic pumpkins and stuffed black cats. Zack, of course, was delighted. He couldn't wait for Halloween.

"Two more weeks," his Dad told him.

As they passed down another aisle, they suddenly saw a Christmas display: Santa shaped chocolates, strings of lights and tinsel garlands.

Zack's old enough to understand a bit about calendars—and he knows Halloween comes first, then Thanksgiving, and finally Christmas. So the display threw him for a loop. He looked back at the Halloween candies, and then at the Santas, and then, throwing up his hands, he turned to his Dad and said: "What's wrong with these people?"

Be honest, you've asked the same question. It used to be merchants waited until after Thanksgiving to put up their garlands and pipe in the Christmas muzak. But each year it gets earlier and earlier. And Christmas gets more and more diluted. More commercialized. Less about prophets and more about profit.

Thanksgiving though seems to have held its own. Despite the die-cut paper turkeys, it still remains a holiday, and a holy day, largely free of extraneous matters.

Still, if we aren't careful, it too could be endangered.

Rubel Shelley tells about a friend of his named Michelle who teaches in a church run pre-school program.

About a week before Thanksgiving, Michelle decided to see how well her students understood the holiday.

“Now let me see,” she said, “Thanksgiving. That’s the day when we think about all the stuff we have. And how we want more things than anybody else has. And how we don’t care about anybody but ourselves. And . . . .”

Quickly, her three and four-year olds started to correct her. “No!” they yelled. “No, no, no!”

She only had a moment to experience a sense of relief, when from the back of the room, one of the little boys shouted out: “”That’s not Thanksgiving, Miss Michelle, that’s Christmas!” (PreachingToday.com)

Ah yes, Christmas may indeed already be a lost cause. I hope not! But it very well may be so.

But Thanksgiving, as even pre-schoolers know, is indeed different! It still hasn’t fallen prey to commercialism. It is still a day when even the wider culture focuses on something beyond its own self-interest. It is the one time of the year when we Americans, who live in the most materially blessed nation on earth, who live in a land of great personal freedoms, sop and collectively say “Thank you!”

That said, it is sometimes a bit nebulous just who is being thanked. Newspaper columnist Lori Borgman writes: “In leafing through magazines . . . with picture perfect feasts, the copy waxes on about being thankful, but never mentions to whom it is we give our thanks. A picture caption says that the bountiful tables make it apparent that we have been greatly blessed. [But] by whom? The makers of Cool Whip? The creators of Stove-Top Stuffing?” (The Record,)

Borgman (and I both realize that in a pluralistic society such as ours, we might be somewhat constrained in being anymore specific. We do, after all, live in a nation where we are not only guaranteed freedom of religion; we are also given the choice to have freedom from religion. Indeed, that freedom is very high on my list of blessing for which I am thankful this and every year. Magazine copywriters, not to mention school officials and public authorities must be cautious about saying who it is that deserves our thanks.

But I am not a public official. I am not a governmental leader who must present a religiously neutral voice. Rather you and I are here as people of faith. We are Christians who worship the God we believe created all things. And, even more than that, as Congregationalists, as members of the United Church of Christ, we are the spiritual ancestors of the very same folks, the Pilgrims at Plimouth, who inaugurated this feast in the first place. Not only are we free to say it is God to

whom we must offer thanks, it is a vital expression of who we are. It is part of our identity.

It was also a part of the identity of the ancient Jews were. And the Hebrew Scriptures, especially the Book of Psalms, are filled with words of thanksgiving offered to the Holy One. And our lesson today is a prime example.

“Make a joyful noise to the Lord,” proclaims the Psalmist. “Know that the Lord is God. It is God who made us and we are his.” (100:1)

No wonder we should offer thanks to God, says the Psalmist. After all, God made us, put us together, gave us life itself! All we are and all we have come from the hand of the Holy One!

“Enter God’s gates with thanksgiving,  
And enter God’s courts with praise.  
Give thanks to [God], bless his name.” (100:2)

Our coming here to worship is in and of itself an act of thanksgiving. You could stay home and read the *Sunday Times*—have a bagel with a schemer. You could catch up on household chores. Or you could just sleep in. A recent poll showed that 71% of Americans listed getting a good night’s sleep as one of their favorite activities, while only 40% listed going to church. (*Christian Century*, November 14, 2006, 7) But here you are. And I hope, not asleep. You chose to enter God’s gates, and in doing so you are saying thank you to the Holy One of Israel. You are saying thank you to the God of the Pilgrims. You are saying thank you to your Creator and mine.

“For the Lord is good,” says the Psalmist, “God’s steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.” (100:6)

And so it is we give thanks.

Now Thursday, after you clean-up the dishes and put away the platters, once you settle into your Lazy Boy to watch the game and down one more slice of pie, it may be a bit tempting to think you’ve done your bit. That you’ve thanked God for another year—or at least until Sunday rolls around. But that’s not how it works.

The comic strip *Baldo* is about a young Hispanic fellow who works at his uncle’s auto part’s store and lives at home.

In a recent strip Baldo and his little sister are sitting at the dinner table with their Dad.

“Baldo,” says his Dad, “why don’t you say grace.”

**“We already said grace,” responds the young man.**

**“No we didn’t,” says his sister.**

**“Yes we did,” retorts Baldo, holding up his plate. “These are leftovers>”  
(Connecticut Post, 11-17-06)**

**You see saying thank you to God, and to others as well, is not just an annual happening. It’s not even just a weekly item on our to-do list. It should be an ongoing activity. It should be a way of life. Everyday, every moment, we can, and should, be offering up words of thanksgiving. It is what folks in recovery groups like AA call having an attitude of gratitude. And it is well captured in an old Yiddish proverb that says: “If we thanked God for all the good things then there wouldn’t be time to weep over the bad.”**

**I was recently reminded of how continuous and ongoing thanksgiving can work when Ellen Cahill shared with me a brief letter she received last month from Etta Simpson.**

**Etta is an African-American woman who heads up the local chapter of the National Council of Negro Women in Mound Bayou, Mississippi. Mound Bayou is a very poor community, but Etta Simpson is not one to let such things hold her down. A retired school teacher, she was determined to set up an after school program in Mound Bayou so that kids could have a place to go and get help with their homework, as well as have some fun; a place that could help them dig out of poverty.**

**When an old abandoned building became available, she got permission to rehab it and turn it into a safe haven for children.**

**She secured some funding though Save-the-Children, and that’s where Ellen came into the picture. You see Ellen was one of the group of eight of us, four adults and four teens, who traveled to Mound Bayou to help tear out an old ceiling, truck out tons of garbage, and roll on gallons and gallons of paint.**

**We were there for under a week. We worked hard, but we didn’t really do that much. But it was a start, and in time the rehab was completed and Etta’s program was up and running.**

**The letter to Ellen is dated October 12, 2006.**

**“Dear Ellen,” it reads, “I was going through some papers and ran across your card. I was happy, because I think about you all, all the time, and Pastor Danner. How are the others doing? I have been doing pretty well. I lost my husband last February first [to cancer] and I had to have a stint put in for a blockage, but I’m**

**blessed to still be working and getting around. Give my love to the others. Still loving and thanking you all for the work you did. Be bless[ed]. Etta Simpson.”**

**Sisters and brothers, we were in Mound Bayou over four years ago. Relative to the whole rehab project, we really didn't do that much. And yet, Etta Simpson is still saying thank you! Now that is what it means to be living with an attitude of gratitude. That is what it means to be continuously offering up expressions of thanksgiving!**

**If Etta, who just lost a husband, and is struggling with heart problems, keeps thanking the eight of us who did so little, think how much more *we* ought to thank the God who gave us life itself! Think how much more we should be thanking the one whose faithfulness endures to all generations!**

**All generations. From David and those who worshipped in Jerusalem; to William Bradford and those early Congregationalists at Plimouth; to Ebenezer and Abigail Jessup and the other founders of our church, all the way down to you and me and Etta and our children and our grandchildren like Zack: God's faithfulness has endured. And for that you and I can say Thank you. Thank you today, thank you tomorrow, thank you for all time to come.**

**Amen  
John H. Danner**