

Thank God! But *how*?

Thanksgiving Day, November 28, 2018

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing ... Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.' But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. Deuteronomy 8:7-9a,17-18

Jesus said, "I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you- you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Matt. 6:25-33

A poem, *Thanksgiving for Two*, by Marjorie Saiser:

The adults we call our children will not be arriving
with their children in tow for Thanksgiving.

We must make our feast ourselves,

slice our half-ham, indulge, fill our plates,
potatoes and green beans
carried to our table near the window.

We are the feast, plenty of years,
arguments. I'm thinking the whole bundle of it
rolls out like a white tablecloth. We wanted

to be good company for one another.

Little did we know that first picnic
how this would go. Your hair was thick,

mine long and easy; we climbed a bluff
to look over a storybook plain. We chose
our spot as high as we could, to see

the river and the checkerboard fields.

What we didn't see was this day, in
our pajamas if we want to,

wrinkled hands strong, wine
in juice glasses, toasting
whatever's next,

the decades of side-by-side,
our great good luck.¹

In anticipation of today, I've been uniquely reflecting on the complexity and diversity and nuances of thanksgiving—*how* we give thanks and *why*.

Consider the poem I just shared. The sense of thanksgiving, implicit but unmistakable, arises from personal circumstances: a relationship that's been shaped and smoothed by decades of disappointments and delights, conflict and tenderness.

As we all know, this particular basis of thanksgiving, the enduring, committed relationship, is not shared by all of us—whether due to choice or due to matters beyond our control. We could name dozens of other types of personal circumstances, such as good health or enough money in the bank, that are not equally experienced by all and that do or do not contribute to giving thanks.

In addition to personal circumstances, our giving thanks, and our understanding of it, is apparently shaped by culture. You've probably read the results of those studies: *The Happiest People in the World*. Columbians! Who knew!

Temperament also comes into play where giving thanks is concerned. Imagine my relief as a teen to learn the word *melancholy*! "Ah! *That's me!*" And, correspondingly, the realization that others were and are by nature sunnier, more optimistic and more readily and demonstratively thankful. One can hear a particular tone in Marjorie Saiser's poem, a tone that I sense is deep but not particularly effusive. How does your temperament affect your giving thanks? How would you describe the usual tone and manner of *your* thanksgiving?

Finally, we Christians can't talk of giving thanks in the absence of God and faith. But hold that thought with me for a moment as I explain that, in my curiosity about all of the facets of thanksgiving, I came across a website: gratefulness.org. Not surprisingly, the website is filled with ideas and practices to cultivate gratitude, or thankfulness.

- *When you take a cab or a train or a plane, be aware of and give thanks for all that conspired for you to be safely and timely transported: the driver, the infrastructure, the good weather.*
- *Think of some one person every day for whom you are thankful. Tell them! And tell them why you are thankful for them.*
- *When you notice that you are succumbing to stress, notice and give your attention to even just one good detail in your immediate environment: the texture of some fabric, how the light is filtering through the window, the steam rising from the bowl of rice; its familiar aroma.*

It was also at gratefulness.com that I found not only Marjorie Saiser's poem but also the timely seasonal commentary on it by author James Crews:

"It's difficult to resist the social pressure that turns the holidays into an excuse for consumption and stress. Yet Marjorie Saiser brings love and acceptance to a situation that might anger or disappoint other parents: her children will not be coming home for Thanksgiving. Even in the first line, she acknowledges that they are adults with lives and children of their own, and we even sense a hint of relief that she and her husband will get to "indulge" alone this year, reminiscing about "that first picnic" that led them to this day together.

"Saiser reminds us that when we 'make our feast ourselves,' when we transform the holidays back into holy days that focus on joy and deeper connection, we see how the abundance of our "good company," no matter who or what that might be, "rolls out like a white tablecloth" before us. So often, we're caught in the rush of obligation that we forget to pause and drink from the more nourishing waters of thanks for our lives as they are, in all their messiness." And so on.

For all of the positive and commendable features of gratefulness.org, notions of faith are only broadly or indirectly suggested there. I note that Marjorie Saiser's poem ends with a recognition of what she calls '*our great good luck.*' Can you feel that? '*Wow! Lucky me!*' (or '*Lucky us!*'). I trust that many of us here have known some similar moment or moments.

I also trust you know that, for us as Christians, any and all genuine thanksgiving — arising from whatever circumstance, culture, temperament or spiritual practice — intimately implicates our God and creator, the One who is both the principal origin of and ultimate recipient of our giving thanks.

In today's first reading, after Moses enumerates for the Israelites all of God's blessings, he urges them to *remember the LORD your God*. Jesus commends the simplicity of the lilies of the field to those prepared to "...strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness..." The author of the letter to the Ephesians commands "giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." (5:20) And many of us here have lodged our hearts the old Doxology: *Praise God from whom all blessings flow.*²

And now, I gather, you will thank God if I bring this message to a close so that you may get on with plans for your own Thanksgivings. But let me first make clear that I am not suggesting or endorsing either-or categories of religious-and-good or secular-and-bad thanksgivings.

If anything, I am suggesting the possible merits of expanding our repertoire for giving thanks. I am suggesting the merits of observing and deeply reflecting on where and when and how and to whom we give thanks. And of course I am praying with you that, as Christians, our giving thanks will be both a heartfelt expression of and a means of deepening our faith.

Thanks be to God!

¹ From *I Have Nothing to Say about Fire*, The Backwaters Press, an imprint of the University of Nebraska Press, 2016.

² First published in 1709, the Doxology was authored by Anglican Bishop Thomas Ken (1637-1711).