

Giving Thanks in Stressful Times

Psalm 100 Philippians 4:4-9
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
November 24, 2019

Here we are, the Sunday before Thanksgiving. I want to take this opportunity to offer some potentially helpful tips on surviving this particular holiday. For instance, as you sit around the Thanksgiving table the first words out of your mouth probably shouldn't be, "Are you loving those Impeachment Hearings as much as I am?" It's also probably not a good idea to ask, "So, why would anyone take the Bible literally?"

I know many of you will be sitting around a table with relatives, and perhaps friends, who may not hold the same political and religious viewpoints as yourself. Most extended families, in fact, are a deep mix of red and blue. And that makes for a potentially stressful encounter. The truth is, **the hyper-partisan atmosphere in this country, especially over the past few years, continues to take its toll on the psyche and mental health of our nation, and especially upon us as individuals.** If this has indeed become the new normal, what can we do to find some peace, sanity, and respite from all the emotional turmoil?

When it comes to family gatherings, like the traditional Thanksgiving meal, you may want to **set some ground rules** right from the start. Rules, which everyone must agree to, and then hold others accountable for, such as simply avoiding contentious topics that will most likely lead to antagonistic quarrels.

For you personally, calling to mind a particular passage of scripture, or even a phrase, word, or mantra may help. For instance, our Epistle reading this Sunday from Philippians 4 begins, "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, rejoice." If rejoicing doesn't come easily, then remember the verse that follows it, "The Lord is near." The verse continues, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Why? Because of its concluding promise, "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus". Along these same lines, here's a verse from Colossians 3:15, "And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body, and be thankful."

Gratitude seems to be the key. That was a primary reason for asking Diana Butler Bass to be this year's speaker at the Harold E. Hill Lecture Series, and why our Book Study group read and discussed her latest book, "Grateful: The Subversive Practice of Giving Thanks."

If you still find yourself struggling, then there's this helpful prayer from **Psalm 141:3**, "**Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my mouth.**" You may want to picture that image.

From a spirituality perspective, it may also help to reflect upon our understanding that as a God of Love, that Sacred Presence dwells within and flows through all things - even that particular person with whom you couldn't disagree more. Here's another suggestion. As you gather for the Thanksgiving holiday, take a good close look around you. And using the list presented in Philippians 4:8, search for and recognize whatever is

true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, any excellence and anything worthy of praise, and think about these things. And do more than simply ponder these things, thank God for them. Then, allow them to lead you to respond in words and deeds of gratitude and thanksgiving.

Going further, identify those persons in your life who are loving, caring, helpful, and a blessing to you - and yes, even those who may be a thorn in your side - and thank God for those persons. This helps us to remember that God is present and with us in the ordinary, routine events and people in our daily life. And here is a claim that you may already find to be a reality in your own spiritual journey of faith. **Your very practice of giving thanks can bring the Sacred Presence more readily and clearly to your consciousness, recognition, and experience.** Remember, when we express our gratitude for God's blessings, it isn't for God's benefit, it's for ours. There's not a world religion or type of spirituality anywhere that doesn't include thankfulness as a vital part of its path to wholeness and well-being. So, **as a spiritual exercise over this coming week and beyond, reflect upon your own pattern of giving thanks and expressing gratitude and appreciation.**

A progressive Christian blog I subscribe to, called the saltproject.org, released this week an updated post entitled, "**A Brief Theology of Thanksgiving.**" It states, "If we think of 'gratitude' primarily as a kind of duty to discharge, we're missing the boat entirely, effectively reducing one of life's wonders to mere good manners. On the contrary, gratitude is a vital force in the world, a profoundly dignifying act that builds relationships, communities, and healthy human hearts. The science on this subject is overwhelming: in study after study, gratitude has been shown to lead to stronger relationships, better sleep, lower blood pressure, fewer trips to the doctor, fewer depressive symptoms, more patience, and more perseverance, among other benefits."

In one particularly intriguing study, gratitude turns out to be a powerful antidote to what is called the '**Headwinds/Tailwinds Asymmetry**'. Let me explain. **Headwinds refers to our all-too-common tendency to focus on the obstacles in our lives, those things that push against us. When that happens, we tend to overlook the blessings, the tailwinds that push us forward.** This imbalance, over time, leads to feeling discontented and resentful. "In short, **focusing on headwinds breeds bitterness; focusing on tailwinds breeds appreciation - and the act of thanksgiving helps call our attention to the winds at our backs.**" To help you focus on all this, you may want to keep a gratitude journal, or open and close each day with prayers of gratitude. If you want to go all out, write and send a thank-you note.

One closing suggestion, in your bulletin there is an insert entitled, "A Thanksgiving Blessing" by Naomi King. You may want to keep it and perhaps include it as part of your Thanksgiving gathering on Thursday. Let us read it together.

A Thanksgiving Blessing by Naomi King

Let us join hands and hearts in gratitude on this wondrous day,
where we have the abundance of our lives before us.

We remember, on this day of bounty, all those who do not have enough, who are afraid, who are lonely, and who suffer.

We wish for the abundance of this world to be shared, for fear to become love, for the lonely to feel welcomed, and for the suffering to know rest and joy.

For the labor, the love, the care that gave us the delights of this and every day, we say "thanks!"

For the nourishment of our spirit, the challenges that strengthen us, and the friends we have on the journey, we sing "thanks!"

For all that is our lives, for these good gifts, we whisper, "thanks!"

Overflowing with gratitude, let us shout, "thanks!"

Amen.

What a wonderful practice. In fact, on the count of three, let us shout together our thanks. One...two...three... THANKS!

Amen.