

Where Thanksgiving Begins

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The Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost
The Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time
The Sunday Before Thanksgiving
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“Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.” – Psalm 100:4-5

One of the things I remember being said about the Rev. Irv Block at his funeral was that he could enjoy a bowl of his wife's homemade vegetable soup as if it were a four-course gourmet dinner. Irv knew how to appreciate the simple things in life – although, if you've made vegetable soup from scratch, you know that it's not simple to get it right – and he never took a blessing for granted.

On Thursday, we Americans will sit down to the most important meal of the civil year. Thanksgiving dinner is, in most homes, at least, the one meal when most of us pause long enough to remember all that we have to be thankful for. Before anyone gets to dig into the turkey and stuffing or mashed potatoes, some families will go around the table and ask everyone to name something for which they're thankful. Others of us will celebrate another kind of loving relationship with friends at a “Friendsgiving” dinner. And still others of us will be grateful to have a safe, secure, comfortable home where we can put our feet up and enjoy the mother of all turkey sandwiches while we watch the parade or the bowl games.

Thanksgiving means different things to different people, but gratitude lies at the heart of our national holiday, and that's where genuine thanksgiving begins. It didn't begin with the Pilgrims in 1621. It didn't begin with the table overflowing with food. It didn't even begin with people getting together. Thanksgiving actually begins with God and the sense of gratitude that God gives us for the life we enjoy, not just on the fourth Thursday in November but on every single day of our lives.

That's why the psalmist urges those approaching the temple gates in Jerusalem to enter those gates with thanksgiving. The gates that lead into the sacred space reserved for God mark the boundary between a life unreflectively lived and a life made beautiful and joyous and great by gratitude.

And, like Jacob, we never know when we'll catch a vision of heaven and realize that we're in God's house even if we're sleeping on the ground with a rock for a pillow. The Bible's theologians all knew that however important the temple was, it wasn't a “God box.” Even while he was dedicating it, Solomon recognized the modest nature of his accomplishment: “Heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee,” he prayed on behalf of all of his subjects. “How much less this house that I have built!” (1 Kgs 8.27). Many centuries later, Gerard Manley Hopkins would remind us that “the world is charged with the grandeur of God,” and anyone who's looked – really looked – at the wonders of creation knows that every flower, every tree, every mountain, and every spring is a gate through which we may pass into God's presence if we do so with gratitude.

Gratitude starts with recognizing the relationship we are in with the rest of creation – that we are part of something vastly greater and more profound than our tiny individual selves. When we

overcome the artificial barrier of our minds that encourages us to think of ourselves as something other than creation, we can begin to appreciate who we actually are: a bit of magnificence, a bit of grandeur, a bit of wonder – a little lower than the angels, according to Psalm 8. We are of the same substance as the stars – that's not sentimentality, it's just basic science – and we belong to creation every bit as much as the stars do. That creation encompasses us all, without exception, and, unlike the Thanksgiving of the Pilgrims, which was the thin edge of the wedge of European colonization of the land of Native Americans, the thanksgiving of which the psalmist speaks reaches deeper into the human soul, transcending ethnicity or class or status, and it brings us into contact with the elements of being human.

Gratitude frees us from the grasping compulsion of consumerism that has so marred our cultural identity. Gratitude relieves us from the debilitating and exhausting effects of affluenza, which has made us so ill. Gratitude opens our eyes and minds and spirits to the miraculous that surrounds us on every side and at every moment. Gratitude carries us through the turbulent waters that we sometimes fear will capsize us.

I want to close by returning briefly to science and then to art and then to faith. Science and religion are often seen as antagonists in a battle for truth, perception, and loyalty. But I believe this has always been a fake fight. Science and religion belong together; Einstein said that science without religion is blind and religion without science is lame. He also said – and this from the greatest scientific mind of our age – that you can go through life as though nothing is a miracle or that everything is a miracle, and that he preferred the latter.

Einstein's belief in the omnipresence of the miraculous grew out of his scientific knowledge that you and I don't have to be here. By “here” I don't mean church, I mean anywhere. You and I don't exist out of necessity. We don't exist because we “have to” exist. We exist because God loves us into being, and it is God's love – and not the random collision of sub-atomic particles – that gives us, in Mary Oliver's words, our “one wild and precious life.” That's God's first and greatest miracle to all of us.

My hope and my prayer for you is that you will celebrate that miracle – that one wild and precious and God-beckoning life – this coming Thursday. Maybe you'll celebrate in the company of other wild and precious lives around a bountiful table with laughter and good food, or perhaps you'll celebrate according to a different script, kicking up the fallen leaves during a quiet walk in one of autumn's closing days. However you celebrate your presence and the presence of others in a beautiful and bountiful creation, pray that the God of mercy, justice, and peace will open the eyes of your heart to see the gates of God's presence all around you. And then enter those gates with thanksgiving.