

B SERMON OCTOBER 10, 2021 -- THANKSGIVING  
"Giving Thanks When..."

It's easy to give thanks when life is going well. However, can we give thanks when we receive a "thanks, but no thanks" letter after a job interview? Can we give thanks when we have recently lost a loved one and are grieving? Can we give thanks in the midst of receiving chemotherapy? Can we give thanks in the midst of covid? Can we give thanks in the midst of trying circumstances and exhaustion? I wonder...

The prophet Joel spoke to the people at a time when their land was ravaged by locust plagues and severe drought, and Joel called upon the people to repent... and more about Joel's prophetic word at the end of this sermon...

Recently I had a conversation with someone who did not get the fulltime job she had applied for. Initially she felt very disappointed, and upon further reflection she thought that maybe she had been spared – spared from working with and for two other people who were horribly disorganized and had difficulty meeting deadlines. Disappointment moved to gratitude.

In another recent conversation I asked a dear friend who has completed six rounds of chemo and is now in remission, whether she could give thanks in the midst of that time. Her immediate response to me was this – "every ... day." There were times when the only prayer she could pray was "thanks" – thanks for her husband who gently cared for her and was there for her every step of the way. On days when the pain was so bad, she could give thanks for pharmaceutical companies who make pain killers. Or give thanks for swaying pine trees she could see from her bed, or for birds singing, or for an act of kindness from some other. In the midst of the deepest and darkest, in the midst of grief, loneliness and fear, she could say "thanks" – for there was always something to be thankful for.

Throughout this time of covid I found myself giving thanks. Sunday evening phone calls with a friend and Wednesday afternoon calls with another friend have been lifelines. I give thanks for the stay-at-home time which enabled me to catch up on the home-front, and offered more opportunity for creative pursuits.

In my late twenties, I quit my office job and went north of Sudbury to plant trees. That was hard work and conditions were not always the best. There were three crews, and each started a half hour apart. If you were the earliest crew, you could grumble about having to get up so early, but you could give thanks for plenty of hot running water in the shower when you got back to camp. If you were the last crew, you could give thanks for an extra hour sleep in the morning, and give thanks that at least there were some running water when you got back in – mind you it was cold – however, if you let it run over your head first, your head warmed it up for the rest of your body. There is always something to give thanks for!

On my summer study leave, one book I read was this – The Happiest Man on Earth – the Beautiful Life of an Auschwitz Survivor, by Eddie Jaku. Eddie was born Abraham Jakubowicz in Germany in 1920, and since 1950 he and his family have lived in Australia. He is 101 years old. He tells a story of his time in the camp, where only the strongest workers survived. He writes that one day *the SS officers who oversaw the camp realised I had skills in mechanical and precision engineering and classified me as an Economically Indispensable Jew... As long as I could work, as long as I was profitable for the Germans, I might survive. On three separate occasions, I was taken to the gas chambers and maybe 20 meters before going in, the guard saw my name, number and profession, and shouted, "Take out 172338!" Three times. I silently thanked my father, who had insisted I learn the skills that would save my life (p. 89).*

Later on, Eddie was able to escape from Auschwitz, however he was shot by a fearful man from whom he sought help. He returned to the camp when a group of workers filed back and sought out a friendly doctor who removed the bullet from his leg. Of all the barracks, there was only one which had a door on the bathroom. The plan was this: When the neighbouring convent church bells rang, in the bathroom of Barracks 16, the Dr. would try and remove the bullet with the only instrument he had -- an ivory letter opener. The church bells would mask Eddie's screams.

*He told me to lick my fingers and use my saliva as a disinfectant – with no soap and no hot water, it was the only way to clean the wound (p. 110).* The wound took three months to heal. The other life saving advice the Dr. gave Eddie was this: "If you want to survive, when you come back from work, you lay down, rest, conserve your energy. One hour of rest is two days of survival."

Eddie writes, “He saved my life that night and I will always be grateful.” During his time at Auschwitz Eddie was grateful for his friend Karl, grateful for every kindness extended to him, grateful for hope.

Throughout history, human beings have gathered to give thanks. When a battle was won or when a community survived a natural disaster, often the kings or queens would declare a national Day of Thanksgiving. In 1578, Sir Martin Frobisher was nearing Baffin Island for the second time and a huge storm blew up, almost destroying his ships against some icebergs. The storm died down, the boats and men were spared, and when they reached shore, “Frobisher gathered his men on the rocky coast for a service of Thanksgiving to show gratitude for their survival and to ask for safe passage home to England” (A Pioneer Thanksgiving, Barbara Greenwood, p. 46).

In 1621 the Pilgrims in Massachusetts gathered in community to give thanks. The winter had been brutal, many people had starved to death; spring came and the people planted wheat, the Natives showed them how to plant corn, and when fall came there was ample food to get them through the coming winter. They held a community feast of thanksgiving, which lasted a week. Eventually, Americans came to celebrate Thanksgiving on the third Thursday of November.

Canadians, too, came to hold a Thanksgiving feast, and the date varied, determined by the Governor General. Finally in 1957, the second Monday in October was declared our official Thanksgiving Day. As Canada has become increasingly multicultural, turkey may no longer be the main dish. And it struck me that there were more boxed turkey breasts in the frozen food aisle than whole turkeys, a reflection of our retirement community, perhaps?

In giving thanks, there is a what and a to whom. We give thanks for something to someone. And as people of faith we give our thanks to God, the source of all life, the source of our every breath and spirit. We give thanks because we realize that we are dependent upon the grace and abundance from God. God help us not to take things for granted.

I hope you have all been able to get out and about during these past several weeks, for the colours in and around town, and up and down hwy. 108 have been amazing. Perhaps we can paraphrase Matthew’s gospel somewhat –

Consider the maples on the hills and 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 (vs. 28, 29). Could any of us come up with the autumnal colours on our own? I hope your joy at seeing, the joy of listening to the return of the sparrows and the bluejays, and the joy of taking in the aromas of fall will prompt you to smile, laugh, maybe sing, and offer your thanks and praise to the Maker and Creator and Giver of all this beauty.

However, I think this gospel is getting at something else too. As humans, we tend to worry, and some more than others, however I think the passage is getting at the fact, that although we may worry about some of the necessities of life, perhaps we need to gain some perspective, and this perspective will help us to gain peace of mind. Offering thanks to God, and thanks to others is the way to gain perspective, peace of mind, and fresh appreciation for what indeed is the abundance before us.

Verse 33 also gives some instruction and reassurance, that when we put the pursuit of God and God's kingdom first in our life, then the rest will be there for us as well – the food, the drink, the clothing, the shelter, etc., and the beauty for the eyes, the beauty for the soul.

In my late twenties God called me to seminary, (this was before my call to ministry in the UCC) – and I remember lamenting to God, would I ever have a matched dish set, and my dream room all done up in green? I started seminary, part-time, and part-time work, and within a year I ended up with a matched dish set from Holland – boerenbont -- farmer's colours – which we still eat from some 35 years later, and I had a room with pale green draperies and accessories – drapes I made from metres and metres of sheeting from Sears, bought for next to nothing. God honoured my desire, my obedience, and blessed me beyond my imagination.

This Thanksgiving, whatever challenging place you may find yourself in, find the one thing for which you can give thanks that day, and offer your thanks to God. Your life will be transformed. And now back to Joel – Joel's prophetic word to the people were words of hope, encouragement and blessing. He begins:

“Do not fear, O soil; be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things!... O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God... I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten... You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied... You shall know... I, the Lord am your God and there is no other... (selected verses from Joel 2:21-27).

Thanks be to God.

#### PASTORAL PRAYER

God of abundance, we thank you for colour – for pinks, reds, wines, oranges, golds, yellows – in all their varied tones. We thank you for the variety of squash now available in all their strange and wonderful shapes and colours. We thank you for flavours – some sweet, some hot, some tangy, some spicy, some new to the tongue.

As we gather together for Thanksgiving celebrations, may we be mindful of those who are lonely, those who are friendless, those who are forgotten. As the food is cooked and shared this week, may we be mindful of a mother who cradles her hungry child, and work for ways to share food around the world. As we go for a walk in the fresh, crisp outdoors and enjoy the freedom to do so, may we remember all those held captive by violence and war, by addiction and pain, by brokenness and despair.

Rather than simply speaking words of thanks and then returning to life as normal, may our compassion be intensified, our concern broadened, our hearts enlarged with your grace. Hear these prayers, O God.

This day we remember all those who grieve, those waiting for bodies to heal, those waiting for spirits to be renewed, those trying to get through life’s changes and transitions. Be with leaders everywhere – those in churches, those in various levels of government, those in business or community organizations – give them wisdom, insight, creativity and patience, give them hope and broad shoulders and strong backbones, that we might live in quietness and peace.

Give our eyes new perspective, fill our hearts with greater gratitude, open our ears to the cries around us, enable our hands to respond with love and compassion. Hear these prayers, O God. We pray the prayer of Jesus, “Our Father