

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"How Can I Say 'Thanks'?"
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There's so much about this Thanksgiving holiday and this season that is about family and home. And well it should be. Because to say 'thanks' is to speak to the One who created life and gave us life. None of us chose to come into this world, but rather came into life by the choice of our parents and by the grace of God. But it is a daily choice to have an attitude of gratitude and say "thanks" both in our families and in our relationship to God.

Because even though you don't have a choice regarding which family brought you into this world, nevertheless, you have a choice in how you treat that family and relate to that family. It is very similar to what happens to us in the church family as well. Most of us never chose which church we attended as children. We received our church family and our baptism very much the way we received our physical life—as a given. And then most of us were given a choice as adolescents as to whether we would confirm what our parents raised as...Presbyterian or Pentecostal or United or Anglican or Roman Catholic or Salvation Army, whatever it was. Then many of us met an individual who we decided we would spend the rest of our lives getting to know...and then many of us changed our spiritual homes at that time.

But our homes have formed us, for good and for ill. Our homes have shaped us and made us who we are. And thanksgiving is a homecoming, and rightly so. Whenever we come home, it is good time to ask ourselves the question, what makes a home a home?

Here in this building where the church meets, we are constantly being called to consider this our home, our community. And I'm offering a course here for adults as well as for youth, exploring what it means to be "home" here. Home here is created first of all by relationship to Jesus Christ, and then to one another, and then to all the history and relationships that have gone before us here in this place and in the other buildings all the way back to John Jones' time in the late 1700s.

So when we say "thank you" to God for our physical life, when we give our lives anew to Christ for our spiritual life, when we take a moment of

thanksgiving, we truly reconnect with the deepest meaning of homecoming. Because the One with whom we need to be most at home with, is the subject of this time we call the sermon time. And while coming home in Newfoundland is wonderful, and having family all around is so good, nevertheless coming home to God is even better. We'll be in His house and family much longer than our physical family. This is the ultimate in being home, long before we go home.

So as you once again as you choose to say "yes" in your heart to God, and choose God's ways in your life, you are home in the deepest sense. When you find others who say "yes" in their hearts to God, and to God's ways in their lives, you have found sisters and brothers, perhaps in a deeper sense than even your own flesh and blood.

The Scriptures remind us that although you have this deep sense of home and deep sense of family, that does not mean there are no longer any family issues nor any difficult memories. The instructions in Deuteronomy to give first fruits, that is, the first produce of your garden, of your crops to God was to help you remember how faithful God has been in the past in the midst of terrible situations. The Bible teaches us that we need to remember the slavery of Egypt, the slavery of sin in our lives to humble us and keep us dependent on God. Because God's people in those days had a tendency toward independence and rebellion against God, and so do we.

The Scriptures we read also teach us and encourage us to rejoice in what God is doing in our lives, to have a thankful spirit. This is because this spirit does not come naturally. It is a God thing, a transforming of our natural tendency. Our natural tendency is to be self-centered, anxious, fearful, whiny and rather than praying, we tend to doing and worrying, or worse, apathy----expressed in that now famous phrase "whatever..."

Over and over, thanksgiving becomes the vehicle whereby all our relationships are put into right perspective. It's so hard to be thankful for your spouse and truly sense the power and privilege of that relationship and then argue or speak unkind words. Similarly with our children, with our extended families...When we thank God for what we have relationally, it brings God into the circle of all our other relationships and invites His creativity and love into those relationships.

So it's no wonder that on Thanksgiving we read the key phrase in Psalm 100 "Know that the Lord is God. It is He that made us. We are His. We are His people and the sheep of His pasture." There the relationship is clear. That's why this verse is followed by "Enter His gates with....thanksgiving and His courts with....praise." Thanksgiving is a prelude to praise. A thankful heart sets the tone for praising God. So if you ever have trouble entering into a worship service, remember what you have to be thankful about. And if you can't think of anything, enlist a friend or family member, anyone you can talk to, enlist them to help you be thankful.

Thanksgiving to God sets the other relationships of our lives in order and when God has His way in our relationships, so much more of our lives turn out well.

Lest I paint too rosy a picture of thanksgiving, I know there are obstacles to having the Bread of Life in every relationship. I know people get hurt and that hurt can become bitterness and unforgiveness if we think the hurt is gone away, when in fact time does not heal, even though God can heal.

Let me just say briefly where there are hurts, whether from family or the church, there is help as well. First of all, not minimizing or downplaying how you've been hurt. Secondly, not letting the person off the hook of the harm or sin they have done. Thirdly, looking to God to have the final say, to avenge the wrong rather than you seeking your own revenge. Fourthly, forgiving what has been done against you does not mean forgetting it. It means choosing to not hold that sin against the other person. Fifthly, let God put that person on his hook so that you might no longer be inappropriately bound to them in your thoughts or heart. Finally, releasing that person or that situation regularly, as often as it comes up, back to God in prayer.

And what I'm about to say I have done a few times here, and will do so a few more times...If this church or office bearers or anyone connected here has sinned against you, then may I stand in for that person and ask your forgiveness. All of us have been hurt by the church and/or church people at some time in our lives. I know I have. All of us need to choose the way of forgiveness and healing as God gives us grace. It is the only healthy way forward. And of course if there is any way I or anyone else here can help, please tell us how.

The church family, like the physical family, will always have its faults and stains and sins, because of the fact that we all carry these things in our individual lives. But as we seek the way of thanksgiving, and recognize what roadblocks there may be to thanksgiving, then we can acknowledge them to ourselves and to God and to others.

And did I mention that the central act of thanksgiving in the Christian church is communion? Many Christians for many centuries have called the Lord's Supper "eucharist." And you know this is a Greek word which means... "thanksgiving." How appropriate that a fluke of the calendar brings together World Communion Sunday and Thanksgiving Sunday. Here at the Table we once again remember how much it cost Jesus to bring us into relationship with God. We remember and choose to remember what He did at the cross for us, the just for the unjust, the righteous for the unrighteous.

Here we think on His sacrifice and say "thank you." Here we meditate on His deep love and say "thank you."

How can we say "thanks" to God appropriately? By dedicating our lives to Him, but perhaps there are more specific ways that you can discuss with your families and friends at the Thanksgiving table...

Let us pray.