

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"The Power of Thanksgiving"
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I've discovered in the past few years that I am a man on a mission to increase the length of a certain season that we celebrate culturally and spiritually. I say I've discovered that I am on that mission because it was not something that I set out to do. It is something that has come to me, or perhaps the Lord has put it in my pathway enough times that I realize I must address it. Sometimes He does that with me. He puts a certain subject in my way enough times that I notice it. I can be a slow learner, even though I consider myself speedy in many areas of life.

What is this mission that I am talking about? What is this season? It is the season of Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving you say, isn't that in October in this country? Yes, but perhaps you've noticed that the candies and decorations for Halloween have come out again this year in early August. They seem to come out earlier and earlier. I'm not a big fan of Halloween. I'm not a big fan of celebrating death, horror movie characters and the occult. I don't like the roots of the celebration and I don't encourage my family to observe it. I'll tell you a little story in this regard.

When we lived in BC, I went to the hospital in our city to visit a patient. This person had just had surgery, and I went to see him just as I do with people here, if I know they're in the hospital. To my surprise, I found out that the hospital had a little contest to see who could decorate the best for Halloween. And the winner was...the surgical floor, where at the nurses' desk, you could find tombstones and open graves and ghouls, goblins, witches and vampires. Now this was comical for some, but for others the grave yard was not what they wanted to see when wondering about the health or even the life of their loved one in the hospital.

So at least since that time, I've decided that it's crazy to put so much energy into this dark holiday, when we seemingly only give one day for Thanksgiving, and in the church we have two days, Thanksgiving Sunday and the day after, which is the actual day of Thanksgiving. So I am trying to muster moral support for extending the season of Thanksgiving and encouraging people to cut back on Halloween, if not eliminate it from their personal agendas altogether.

I think the harvest celebration with thanksgiving to God is a wonderful and significant part of the cultural calendar, and I hope that you will give some more reflection and concern for this holiday, and even more importantly the place of thanksgiving in your everyday life.

Thanksgiving begs the question: To whom are we giving thanks? This then initiates important spiritual discussions about God.

We give thanks at meals. We give thanks generally once a year for the harvest. We give thanks in our prayers every week on Sunday at the close of the service as well as our intercessions for others.

We send people thank you cards when they express to us a tangible service or are thoughtful in some way. I've received many, many cards over the years for the life transitions services that the church offers...the hatching, matching and dispatching as someone has said.

But where are we personally in our talking with God about our appreciation for what He is doing in our lives. I am good, perhaps all of us are good, at bringing our complaints to Him. The church down the road here notes that many people want to serve God...but only as advisors. It is okay to bring our complaints to the Lord. His shoulders are broad, broader than the whole planet. But what are we doing to increase our personal outflow of thanksgiving?

Some of us keep lists for prayer, whether in our minds or in a journal or on a scrap of paper, or even in a computer or PDA. We want to remember what to pray for, and that is a good thing to do. But let us also keep before God in conversation those moments of appreciation, so that both you and the Lord can enjoy that moment of thankful worship.

I am doing that lately with the weather. When the sunshine comes, I soak it in with a grateful heart and worship the Lord for His mercy at that moment. I try to do that with every weather pattern, by the way. You can read my meditations I gave on the weather on VOWR this last week on the internet. You can also read these sermons that I've been giving on the internet if you have the computer access.

I also do that when I'm in the washroom, whether with washing or simply for the relative state of health I have. I do that with the food I receive and the company I keep. There are many times to worship the Lord with thanksgiving. The writer to the Hebrews suggests we remember that God is God, and all that that means.

He tells us throughout the Book of Hebrews about how the Old Testament is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. How Jesus is God and to be worshipped, not the angels, how Jesus fulfills the symbolic functions of the Temple, or the High Priest, of the animal sacrifices, how Jesus speaks to us better than the fine sacrifice of Abel, the first murder victim. He reminds us that this created world and existence will be surpassed by the physics of the new heaven and earth that will be ours in that great reunion of all who trust God through Jesus.

And he sums up his teaching with 12:28

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe (NIV)

...let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; (NRSV)

There is something that happens in our spirits when we choose to be thankful rather than other approaches to our daily life. We went blueberry picking this weekend. Now what is the first thing you think about for berry picking? The weather. If it is pouring rain, then that's not a very nice activity. Second thing you think of berry picking...what about the flies, what are they like? And if you're like me, you attract them without even trying. And then of course, make sure you bring a smaller bucket because if you bring too large a bucket, you'll get depressed by the amount of time it takes to get so little fruit. But shouldn't we be rejoicing in that little wonder God allows us to enjoy rather than the number of fly bites or the kind of weather? Aren't there enough people in the world who are daily counting their fly bites? We don't want to be that way, do we? Shouldn't we rather be rejoicing in the fresh berries and their antioxidant, and other wonderful effects?

So here is my plea, just as the writer to the Hebrews suggests we need to remember who God is, his mighty power, his holiness, the wonder of who He is, we too should be thankful, and worshipping Him with our

thanksgiving moment by moment, day by day and as the hymn says, "Counting our blessings."

As we do this, our worship will not be so much out of an anxiety because we have to say our prayers. Remember Yosemite Sam used to always say, "Say your prayers, varmit." It's not that spirit that we want to cultivate, it is a spirit of thanksgiving.

I'm warning you that I will say this again in October, because it needs to be repeated. I won't preach the same sermon exactly. But I will be encouraging you and me to cultivate the thankful part of your heart.

Jesus didn't want to be trapped into the man made Sabbath laws of his time. He wanted to heal and to minister and to care for those so badly burdened by all that life throws us. That's why he did what he did when he did in the Luke 13 passage we read. Shouldn't we treat each other at least as well as we treat our animals and our pets? That was his argument, because often we don't.

Kindness and thanksgiving are cultivated. They don't come naturally. Complaining, whining, a miserable spirit comes naturally. But choose to cultivate that which is best and that attitude will follow you all the way to the end of your life and into the next.

I don't know how many of you have visited in the care homes here or away. You can often see in people what has been an interior habit or attitude by the way they are in their retirement home. Whether miserable or wonderful, or sometimes something in between, but usually the attitude that you have carried all your life comes out. It comes out, whether in shining light or in baffling darkness. It comes out.

Let us then choose thankfulness, gratitude and the power of God through these attitudes.

Otherwise, we will stay in that hellish play of complaint, of feeling one hasn't received what one deserves, of always getting the dirty end of the stick. Only rarely does one choose to be bitter consciously. Let us instead choose to be thankful and content. Let the season of Thanksgiving begin.

Let us pray.

