

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"How goes the Thanksgiving battle?"
Dr. J. Dent

October 11, 2009
Thanksgiving Sunday

We come together on a weekend known mainly for overeating, and for the consumption of turkey. I'm not really sure why the culture simply guts the holidays when the Church tries to present reasons why they are still holy days, from which we get the word "holiday." Our culture and general tendency is to concentrate on the activities of the season rather than reasons for the seasons. Thus decorating becomes the main thing. Feasting becomes the main thing. And of course before these things can happen, shopping becomes the main thing. Now, we are here to keep the main thing as the main thing.

It's not that we crave superficiality or that we plan to forget why we make certain weekends special, it just happens. So we come to the Thanksgiving table, and it seems like a big deal even to ask for what those around the table are thankful. But may I once again suggest you do just that at your tables. Because we can only get back to the real meaning of this holiday, as we ask others to do so with us. And you know my one man mission of hoping a one day holiday becomes a full blown season of Thanksgiving, at least between Canadian and American Thanksgiving, between the blueberry harvest here and the cranberry harvest there.

Americans tend to make their holiday a part of their national identity, and so add to their patriotic fervor. They seem to push what we seem to soft peddle, the identity that links all our nations together into one nation called Canada: Newfoundlanders, Quebecers, Aborigines, and all the other nations that don't claim to be nations within Canada. I suppose that is in part what Rex Murphy was trying to get at in calling his book *Canada and Other Matters of Opinion*.

We are more than an opinion, but we have to work at being an "us" for there to truly be something worth keeping. The same is true for the Church. We have to work at being an "us" together, otherwise we drift apart. This is true both at St. David's and the Presbyterian Church in Canada and the Christian Church, across denominations and non-denominations. We have to work at being an "us" together. So what does that work look like?

I think you already know what my thesis is on this day. The work is thanksgiving.

The Scriptures we read remind us how often the Psalmist brings us to thanksgiving and praise of God for what we already have. Indeed much of what the Bible brings to us is that it is appropriate to be thankful in the best of times and in the worst of times, when we are completely healthy and vigorous, and when we doubt how long we will live.

And you know when you say you are thankful, that that thanks must be directed somewhere. You are always thankful to someone, because thanksgiving always happens in relationship. Now we might only be thinking it in our private thoughts. But we must bring such thoughts out into the open and bring them to others, and especially to God.

Just before I forget, let me recommend a movie to you. I don't usually do this, because movie recommendations, like book recommendations are a risky business. But here is the recommendation anyway: Rent *Fireproof*. It is a Christian movie, with an overt Christian message, but it is a powerful symbol of hope for a relationship which you may have given up on. And please, always give me feedback on my recommendations.

So we bring our thanks, which we may have only thought about back into the open, back to others and back to God. And if you find it hard to know what to be thankful for, bring that to others and to God. Because this is like exercise, we only build our thankful muscles by using them. And the only way to build those muscles is by using them over and over again.

So use them in creation, when you see the colours of the trees, when you see a beautiful pet or flower or person. When you consider the complexity and wonder of life itself, when you look up into the sky on a clear day, when you look out over the ocean... Use your thankful muscles when you use technology, when you reflect on all the help and abundance we have in getting the basics of life like food, clean water, heat, shelter, transportation, cleaning, exercise and recreation, to name a few.

Use your thanksgiving muscles when you think through every family member in prayer. When you say your prayers at night, do you mention everyone by name, I know it might be a long list...? When you say their names, and you want to flex your thankful muscles, say "Thank you

for...and then add their name.” It may change your relationships. This may be the beginning of something extraordinary. Because I really do believe that this is an extraordinary holiday, holy day to change completely what we are like. What are we like, you ask?

We are becoming more and more a people of personal rights, but less and less a people of personal responsibilities. Therefore, we meditate more on what we lack, how we deserve more or better, and not on what we already have, and have in abundance. As we consider our rights, we tend to whine and complain, just as they did in the desert so long ago, after escaping the Egyptian holocaust. The miracles and signs and wonders they experienced were almost beyond description, yet so many still do not believe they had hope or anything. And we experience a host of wonders and signs in our lives, yet we tend to be like the Israelites of old. So we turn to God to be thankful.

We turn to God once again and simply say “Thank you.” This primary relationship informs all our other relationships, or it should. And once thanksgiving becomes internalized we become a different person, a transformed person. And I know I’m not the thankful person I need to be. That’s why we need a holiday and a season to begin to retrain spiritually for one of our greatest needs. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thessalonians 5:18) There aren’t many parts of Scripture which are any plainer than this when it comes to the will of God. God’s will for you is to be thankful.

So now it is something like becoming more fit. We can simply know that knowledge and do nothing about it and see what happens to our health. Or we can begin to work out in this area. What kind of workout do you think you need to become more thankful? If you were God, what homework would you give yourself to become more thankful? If you didn’t respond to kind nudges, would you resort to more powerful interventions, or continue to be creatively non-interventionist?

Sometimes we wonder why God allows us to go through what we do in life. I do. There is a mystery there. But at the same time, our lives are a gift. They are a gift for which we are to cultivate gratitude. This does not come naturally. It comes as we talk to the One who gives life. So thanksgiving really is a battle for the mind. It is an internal struggle, much more than a cultural one. The culture is fine with a Turkey Day and a Scary Day in

October. They don't care if you think about God, or about the Devil. They don't care about your inner life at all.

But we do. Because it is as we consider this, that we have all the other things in life that we need. Seek first God's kingdom, the Newfoundland motto, the verse from Matthew 6:33. So begin afresh today to be thankful for your relationship with God. Begin today to be thankful even for politicians, and political leaders. Begin today to be thankful even for those in our lives who annoy us and drive us to the end of our patience. As Matthew says, our lives are so much more than what we worry about. Our lives are certainly more than our eating and drinking and clothes. Our lives are so much more than our material abundance. You know that, here in your head. Now how do you live it?

By being thankful and by remembering we only get to keep what we give away. Let's all determine to work on our Thanksgiving workouts today when we feast, and everyday.

Let us pray.