

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Grace at Meals"
Dr. J. Dent

October 10, 2010
Thanksgiving Sunday

The pace of life only seems to be increasing over the years. We have found many machines and many computerized time saving devices. Yet, we still have littler amounts of time than expected.

There are certain things that slow us down, catch us in our tracks, cause us to stop. The acknowledgement of an addiction or compulsion we cannot stop doing, the loss of health, of a loved one, in ourselves; the loss of a friend or loved one; a criminal act against us, such as a theft or violation or fraud; and times of prayer all slow us down. I hope one of the benefits of coming here Sunday by Sunday is the sense you have enough time to pray. In our regular day to day routines, sometimes we try, I try, to jam in so many things before the day or night is gone, but I fail, I often fail. We only have so much time.

There are also happy celebrations that can slow us down a tiny bit, birthdays, anniversaries, baptisms, weddings, holidays, such as Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter. Although we certainly could debate whether Christmas slows us down or winds us up. But Christmas Day is what I am thinking about, and it tends to be slow, the rest of the lead up to is quite frantic, or can be.

The seasons hit us sometimes the way storms hit us. It's almost as if the storms that hit us regularly are trying to teach us something. Igor was the last one, but we have seen many storms. So it is in our lives.

The question does not ever seem to be what we have done to prepare for the electrical outage, or how strong we have built our homes or fences. It seems to be what we can take on the inside. Some can lose so much, yet still have a measure of peace within. Some can lose very little, and seem to fall apart, whether they appear on the news or not.

I suspect we all have a certain ability to experience loss just as we all have a certain ability to experience pain. Some of us can tolerate a lot of pain, some of us can't. Some of us can experience a lot of loss, some of us can't. But we can all learn through both loss and pain.

The Scriptures today tell us to remember to be thankful. They start in the Old Testament with Deuteronomy reminding us to share with those around us our faith journeys. The Jews told their story about Abraham being a wandering Aramean. They further tell of the miraculous deliverance from Egypt, as we are to tell of the miraculous deliverance from sin in Jesus. When they experience the seasons of harvest, they were supposed to take something of the first parts of the harvest and give it back to God, saying "Thank you." This is called the "first fruits." Similarly, we bring our offerings here week by week, or month by month, whether in the offering plate or by pre-authorized debit, and say the same, "Thank you."

And there is another moment in our days, where all our thoughts and agendas and busy-ness is supposed to subside for a moment. We are to pause and reflect, and be refreshed in that moment. We call these moments "Grace at Meals." And it really is supposed to be a small moment of grace in our lives, taken whenever we take sustenance into ourselves. Culturally, this moment of grace seems to be waning in North America. However, here in the east, there are still many who pause, expecting a word of thanksgiving, given in anticipation of all the food and the provision of God we experience everyday.

Now I have noticed in some circles that it is inappropriate to say grace in an extended way. In one family gathering, I remember someone saying, "We're not letting you say grace again, because our food will be cold." I also remember being in Toronto with some Korean friends, who asked me to say grace at a Korean restaurant. I gave my briefer version of thanksgiving, but afterwards was taken aside. I should have prayed a much longer version, showing a true attitude of thanksgiving. They knew I wasn't Korean, and it was okay.

So whether you pray long or short prayers, whether you greet the meal with a shared moment of silence where each one says their own prayer, or with out loud prayers, in public or in your home, no matter what you do, remember God's blessings and give thanks. This is particularly true on Thanksgiving weekend. It is true in this Thanksgiving season. But each of us still needs to learn to cultivate gratitude and those invaluable moments where we say, "Thank you God."

Sometimes we sing our Thank yous. Sometimes we recite a prayer we learned when we were little. Say and do what you do and mean it, taking in the words.

The Lord gave thanks before he broke bread, not only in the Upper Room on the eve of his death; he also gave thanks before multiplying the loaves and the fishes. It apparently was his regular practice. Before our meals, it is our moment of grace and one place for perpetual thanksgiving throughout the year. This is why I am giving this so much time. This is over a thousand moments of thanksgiving per year.

We need to perpetuate this holiday we call Thanksgiving. We need to perpetuate these moments. We have tried to set up here in the front of the church a few of the ministries that we have here, of the prayer shawls reminding us of the love of the church and her Lord for each of us going through hard times. And the quilters who make the baby blankets remind us of the precious gift of life that we give thanks for today and everyday. (go over to the table, talk about the coleus, the pears, the snow peas...)

The food items remind us how reliant we are upon our gardens and farmers, who in turn are reliant upon the Lord, whether they know it or not. Thanksgiving often centers around food, just as the first fruits offering and the Lord confronting those looking for more food. But really these are just opportunities to again acknowledge how much we have, and that life itself is a gift, to be appreciated, to be acknowledged, to be nurtured and to be given back to God.

The answer to the anxiety in our lives is the nurturing of moments of thanks and prayer. There are so many things, almost everything that we have so little control over, even within ourselves. Yet, as we give these over to our God, we can say, "Thank you." And the peace that passes understanding can guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Grace and peace are how many of the New Testament begin. We need grace and peace within.

Today as we sit around our holiday tables, I once again encourage you to mention to everyone there what you are thankful for. It is good to do this at Thanksgiving. It is better to do this often throughout the seasons and weekends of the whole year. Everyday. Every meal.

I believe it is the Salvation Army that does not serve communion, but does say that every meal is an occasion of eucharist, of thanksgiving, of communion with the Lord and whoever else is sitting around the table.

God knows our hearts. Yet it is our actions that speak to one another and to Him.

Let us pray.