

Thanksgiving is the name of the game

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, November 26, 2009: Thanksgiving Day.
Based on Matthew 6: 25-33.*

As holidays go, Thanksgiving is a secular one. No challenging birth narratives associated with it; no death or resurrection claims involved. Just simple thanksgiving. Secular. Well, yes, I suppose that it is secular in that it doesn't assume a particular deity or even one at all for that matter. But upon reflection, giving thanks—particularly the expression of thanksgiving but also even just the feeling of gratitude—is profoundly spiritual. It changes us, softens us, warms us; it gives us perspective because it assumes something about the giftedness of life itself.

I have a complex history with thanksgiving—not just the holiday though that, too, not the least of which the millions of calories associated with it. By the way, I am always amused that the gospel passage associated with this day, a portion of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, begins with Jesus' admonition that we should not concern ourselves with what we shall eat on a day that largely revolves around what and where (as New Yorkers, where is often the larger question) we shall eat.

But that is another story—and another kind of complication, caloric complications. What is deeper than that is how we understand being thankful and for me anyway—and I think for most of us—what that means about God. When the elevator is waiting on my floor or the train pulls into the station just as I walk down the steps, I say, "Thank God." One morning as I ran to the closing door the conductor and I made eye contact, and he reopened it. As I thanked him, he said, "You are welcome, Father"—and I thought, thank God there are a few good Roman Catholic boys left in the world! What he doesn't know

about my priesthood will not hurt him!

And then I think what on earth does that mean about my theology, about God and God's activities. Do I really think that God has manipulated the elevator or the train to accommodate me? Of course not. That is the NYC version of praying for a parking place. Surely arranging world peace would be a better function for an omnipotent God than these acts of making straight the way just for us. Do I think that God nudged the conductor into that act of kindness? Well, maybe—that is truly extraordinary and if a bit of schoolboy reverence or guilt pushed him along, then so be it.

This is what seems true to me: the inclination to be thankful is never a bad thing and always trumps the need for theological precision and clarity. Let's say, "Thank God" every time we have the impulse to because that desire is a good thing and suggests something about who God is and what God wants for us.

The fact that God has always been about seeking to be in deeper and deeper relationship with us is an occasion of unending thanksgiving. One of the names attributed to Jesus, about which we shall read and sing in the coming weeks of Advent, is Emmanuel—"God with us." Not just God over us or God before us but God with us. Though it is a notion so intrinsic in our theology that we cannot imagine otherwise, thinking about the fact that God's essence somehow rests upon God's being in relationship with us startles me into profuse thanksgiving, taking away my breath as it does.

And from that basic model of relationship, that premise that God is with us, there flows an entire network of relationships in our lives that

mirrors God's love—some more obvious than others but all—even the least obvious ones—mirror the fact of our interdependence with one another. Some of us are lucky enough to find the life partner who really is for life; others of us make that discovery sometimes, but not always, partially but not as fully as we would want; others of us are liberated from our aloneness through alternative avenues—other family members or friends who become family.

By loving us, God opens us up to love others and to be loved by them. Sometimes the love is as broad and distant as the sympathy we feel for those in this world reeling from life surrounded by war and deprivation; sometimes it is as close to home as the spouse, partner, or friend who knows the real truth about us—truth that otherwise is reserved only for God's knowing. Every year we get calls from people who want to spend part of Thanksgiving Day helping out in the soup kitchen or some other place that provides a meal, a big meal with all the trimmings, for folks who don't usually get the big meal, let alone the trimmings. No one, it seems we believe, should be alone or hungry on Thanksgiving Day. And though sometimes this dream seems to be for only one afternoon each year, it is an important dream, a dream that connects us to those at our table and to those beyond it.

So today in addition to the amber waves of grain, the bounty of our loaded tables, the health of those around it, the prosperity that supports us . . . in addition to all that, I am thankful that God is "with us," and that because of that fact, our aloneness is never as alone as it feels. I am thankful that all tables that share goodness and hope and renewal flow from a central table in our lives, the one around which we worship again and again. We call this liturgical celebration the GREAT THANKSGIVING; and, indeed it is, and not just for one glorious morning a year but for every day and every moment. We gather in worship first and forever to give thanks; the word "Eucharist" means thanksgiving. Every time we are here we are nourished at a table that is magnanimous—all who would come are invited, to gather at a table that is bounteous—there is always enough and more that can be added, at a table that is holy—ordinary elements made by our prayers to be vehicles of particular grace.

Happy Thanksgiving, friends. May the quiet holiness of these moments this morning remain in your hearts throughout the day and always.

Amen.

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