

“An Interesting Scripture for Thanksgiving”

We are approaching the great celebration of Thanksgiving. In my family we gather as many members as possible for this holiday, which we celebrate on the Friday or Saturday AFTER Thanksgiving Day, to allow for travel time, gatherings with other family and friends and so forth. For many years now Gilles and I have hosted the meal at our home. It's an important family reunion for us.

There are many good things about Thanksgiving. It has been less commercialized than other holidays on our calendar, especially Christmas and Easter. I am a bit worried about Thanksgiving retaining its unique character, however- I wonder if it won't eventually be swallowed up by our culture's Christmas mania. I'm praying it won't.

Thanksgiving leads us to count our blessings. Thanksgiving often leads people who rarely pray before meals to offer some form of thanks to God before carving the bird and diving into the dressing.

In addition to the Thanksgiving symbols of Pilgrims, turkeys, and Indians, there is the Thanksgiving cornucopia. The cornucopia is an ancient symbol used in both Greek and Roman mythology. It symbolized a magic horn of plenty which was always full: its abundance could never be exhausted. For us the horn of plenty speaks of God's generosity to us- blessings too numerous to name; the abundant life provided by Jesus Christ as we claim him as Savior.

But there are not so good things about Thanksgiving also. We thank God for his incredible bounty, but then we drift into various manifestations of gluttony. We overindulge in food and drink. The day offers relentless rounds of unending football games. The day kicks off the first frantic round of holiday shopping, with Thanksgiving weekend providing merchants with their biggest shopping weekend of the year.

On Thanksgiving a kind of overindulgence begins which carries us through the end of the year with binges of consumption in every corner of our lives. Holiday parties and goodies and toasts draw us in, not just on the holidays

themselves, but on all the days in between. The Jenny Craig system of weight loss declares: “It’s a holi-DAY, not a holi-MONTH.”

The Thanksgiving symbol of the cornucopia should, for Christians, sound the joyful noise of God’s bountiful blessings, BUT we easily forget that **we must use our blessings to bless others.**

Our gospel lesson for today spells this out very clearly. What an interesting Scripture for this season! In our church we often follow what is called the “Lectionary”, which provides readings from the Bible for every Sunday of the year. Matthew 25:31-46 is our assigned Gospel text for this day. Again, I say, “What an interesting Scripture for Thanksgiving.”

The scene drawn by Matthew, of Jesus’ judgment, with the sheep on the right and the goats on the left, does not convey what we often call, “the holiday spirit.” His words reveal that in return for God’s generous gifts—love, forgiveness, salvation, redemption, adoption, an eternal life of blessing--- there is something expected of us: that we love one another.

And not only that we love one another, but that we pay special attention to the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, lonely, homeless and imprisoned. Jesus doesn’t mince words. Jesus shows us that our God is not an abstract theoretician. God is a dynamic, DOING God; acting, creating, judging, loving—in the lives of all people everywhere. Jesus Christ himself is the best example of God’s proactive involvement in human life. Why did God become flesh and enter our world through Jesus? Because:

*Beauty is an abstraction until it finds expression in a flower. Music is a fantasy until the notes of an instrument give it speech. Art is ethereal until it embodies itself in sculpture or in picture. The great things of created and uncreated thought are only grasped and understood when they find expression in some easy, intelligible and often substantial form.*  
(John MacBeath, in “TheFace of Christ”)

How do we pull together the call of Christ, to care for the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, lonely, homeless and imprisoned—and the cornucopia of Thanksgiving? We need to let the horn of plenty, that speaks to us of the abundant GRACE of God, sound a note of warning to us. We need to allow the Spirit of God to shake us out of our self-preoccupied complacencies and our selfish accumulation of more and more and more. We need to allow the

Spirit of God to remind us that we **MUST USE OUR BLESSINGS TO BLESS OTHERS.**

When I was growing up, my mother, the wife of a chemistry professor at the University of Nebraska, always invited the foreign graduate students in my dad's lab to join us for meals at holidays. One student, Shemiah, from Africa, was at our Thanksgiving meal for decades. He called my mother, "Mom", which gave rise to interesting questions at times. My own children got to know Shemiah, and did at first wonder why he called their grandmother "Mom"! We explained that she was like his American mother, and he wanted to honor her with that title. I learned so much from my mom about using our blessings to bless others.

When I served churches in McHenry county, several families always invited servicemen to their homes for Thanksgiving and Christmas- who were out at the base nearby, and unable to be with family who were often in states far from here. I have learned a lot from my brothers and sisters in Christ about simple ways to use our blessings to bless others.

In the past few weeks this church, our brothers and sisters in Christ right here at Baker, have raised \$1300 for the Salvation Army's program, "Stuff the Turkey", which provides food for a Thanksgiving meal for families in need.

You have the opportunity to ring the Salvation Army bell every year, through that effort which is headed up by Rick Carlson. Stop into Baker Hall to sign up for an hour or more of ringing this season. We keep winning the prize for our efforts during this fundraising.

A week ago Saturday numerous volunteers showed up at the house across 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue to help paint and put finishing touches on the work that's been done there to prepare the home for another refugee family.

Friends, have you ever experienced what we call "holiday letdown"? I think most of us have. I remember when I was a kid- maybe in middle school, and we got through Thanksgiving and Christmas, and it wasn't so exciting- no longer the way it had been when I was a younger child. I felt really down, and wondered if I'd never experience holiday joy again?

Jesus tells us, “Use your blessings to bless others. And pay special attention to people in serious need.” I think THAT is the secret. Holidays no longer disappoint when we focus on Jesus’ message.

My father died in 1993. I was serving a church in Mundelein. When I returned from the funeral, we were coming up on Fathers’ Day. God, in his wisdom, had arranged that I was on duty to lead worship at the Libertyville nursing center on that Sunday. I wondered how I’d get through it—but it was a moment of RECEIVING and not GIVING. I was blessed to be there, to hold the hands of people who were moms and dads, and to hear their words of thanks and appreciation for my coming to be with them.

So, this year, let’s embrace a new focus for Thanksgiving. Let’s not see how much we can consume, but how much we can offer to others. This is Christ’s command. And he gives us the Holy Spirit to help us obey! Let’s celebrate and share our blessings, rather than piling them up higher and higher. Let’s see Christ’s face in those around us. Let’s find honor and gratitude in SERVICE, rather than times of being served.

We’re not perfect by a long shot. We fail to do and be what Christ commands frequently, and sometimes quite happily. But we can do better. We can. God will show us the way. Amen.