Sunday Sermon
November 25, 2018

“Why Thanksgiving?”
Psalm 100
Rev. Andy Call, Lead Pastor

The turkey has been eaten, the stuffing is gone. All that remains of the cranberry sauce is the stain on the youngest grandchild’s dress. Sweet potato casserole and pumpkin pie have resumed their place on the culinary shelf until next year. The Macy’s parade has been marched, and by now, even the cleanup is mostly complete. The final scores are in the books from football games that no one outside Detroit or Dallas really cares about.

Yes, Thanksgiving is over. We are even past the ubiquitous Black Friday, though Cyber Monday still awaits. Time to put up the Christmas tree. On to the next holiday and all the conspicuous consumption that accompanies this season of the year.

It may be surprising to come to worship this morning and be greeted by Thanksgiving hymns, images of harvest, and even a sermon anachronistically titled after the aforementioned feast day. Why Thanksgiving? Doesn’t the pastor know that is yesterday’s news? Did he misread his calendar when he planned this worship theme?

While the calendar may indicate that Thanksgiving is a day of the past, as people of faith, we know that giving thanks is part of who we are – not just one day a year, but every day. Throughout this sermon series, we have focused on Songs of Praise, expressions of worship from the Book of Psalms. Two weeks ago, we were inspired to joyful approach into God’s house with Psalm 122. Last Sunday, we celebrated 90 years of ministry in this location with Psalm 90’s reminder that God who was our help in ages past is our hope for years to come. Today, we conclude our series with Psalm 100, a memory verse from the Psalms second only to Psalm 23.

The psalmist begins with the exhortation to Make a joyful noise to the LORD, welcome news to those who are less than confident in their own singing voice. But this instruction is not just for those in church or even for those who worship the God of Israel; it is for all the earth. Everyone is to come, regardless of where they live or what they believe, to offer praise to the true source of life. We are called to do so not with a prescribed ritual or set structure, but only with sheer and abundant joy. Worship should be an expression of overwhelming gladness. We are called to enter God's presence with a song in our hearts as well as on our lips.

Know that the LORD is God. God’s existence is not merely a possibility or a suggestion, but a certainty. Know that the LORD is God. It is he that made us, and we are his. God is the Creator of all, and God has sovereignty over our lives. I love the way the King James Version renders this. “It is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves.” Of course, we know we did not create ourselves physically, though sometimes we act as if did. But we need to be reminded of God’s authority, because while we know God created us, we like to take credit for what we know, what we are good at doing, what we have achieved in life. We even have a phrase for this in our common parlance: a “self-made person.” We may have worked hard to get where we are in life. We may have invested substantial energy, time, and money in our education. We may have started at the bottom of the ladder and had to work our way up. We may have used great determination to weave together the disparate threads of individual lives to form a tight-knit family of love and support. But regardless of how hard we worked, we are responsible neither for the raw materials nor for the drive to build a life from them. All that we are and all that we have comes from God. It is God that made us, not we ourselves.

We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. You probably find it comforting to be reminded that we are God’s people, created and called by God, blessed to be a blessing. But being referred to as sheep is another matter. If I asked you to name the first quality that comes to mind when you think of sheep, what would it be? Most people answer, “dumb.” Sheep have a reputation for being less than the sharpest tool in the shed. They sometimes do things that do not make sense to us, like following one another into an enclosed space or falling into holes. But a 2001 study in England revealed that sheep are far more intelligent than we give them credit. Researcher Keith
Kendrick studied the behavior and memory patterns of sheep over several years. His study determined that sheep have the capacity to remember as many as 50 unique faces for as much as two years. That is better than many humans. What is more, the sheep were able to recognize the faces of other sheep not just straight on, but in profile. They were also able to recognize human faces as well as those of other sheep.\footnote{“Amazing Powers of Sheep” by Helen Briggs. BBC Sci/Tech. Online (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/sci/tech/1641463.stm) Accessed November 20, 2018.} Sheep are remarkably social creatures, capable of a wide range of emotions and extremely loyal. A 1993 study at the University of California at Berkeley determined that relationships between sheep were complex and advanced, including maintaining long-term bonds, sticking up for weaker sheep, and exercising reconciliation for past grievances.\footnote{T. E. Rowell and C. A. Rowell. “The Social Organization of Feral Ovis aries Ram Groups in the Pre-rut Period.” In Ethology. Vol. 95, p. 231.} Sheep are neither stupid nor unfeeling. The Psalms were written in a more agrarian time and place; people understood sheep much more than we do in our culture. The psalmist probably knew that sheep are not dumb and did not use the metaphor pejoratively. However, tended as flocks used for wool or food, sheep require ample supplies of food and water and are especially vulnerable to predators. Put simply, domesticated sheep need shepherds to guide and protect them. So, when psalmist says we are the sheep of God’s pasture, it does not mean that we are foolish and mindlessly follow others, but rather that we rely on God for our provision and protection. That, too, is an important lesson for us, for we are prone to put our trust in illusions of security and self-sufficiency.

In verse four, we encounter our theme: \textit{Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him and bless his name.} This is the purpose behind our gathering, our joyful noise, our acknowledgement of God as the source of life — to give thanks. When we practice gratitude, we put ourselves in right relationship with God and the world God created. Being grateful helps us to remember that we are not the center of the universe and that each of us has abundant reasons to be thankful.

Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast writes, “Gratefulness is the key to a happy life that we hold in our hands, because if we are not grateful, then no matter how much we have we will not be happy — because we will always want to have something else or something more.”

God alone is worthy of our thanks and praise. God is the source of all life, the provider of what we need, and the only true source of security. But there is even more reason for us to offer God thanks and praise. As the psalmist reminds us, God is not only great; God is also good. \textit{For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.} Repeating a description of God that is found throughout the Hebrew scriptures, Psalm 100 assures us that God’s love for us will never end. That is reason to be thankful, indeed.

Gratefulness is too often overlooked as mere pleasantry, a kind but optional expression. How many of us still follow the practice of sending hand-written thank-you notes? My own track record is dismal. I usually default to a quick email or text message, if I remember to take the time to do so at all. Jenn and I never even finished sending thank-you notes after our wedding 17 years ago. Maybe you are better at that than I am; in fact, I know many of you are, because I have received lovely notes from you. But too often, we see gratitude as optional, a nice but unnecessary gesture. I want to suggest to us today that gratitude is a powerful change agent that has tremendous potential impact on ourselves and our world.

Being grateful does not simply make those who receive our gratitude feel better about themselves or their actions. Gratitude profoundly shapes the one who feels and expresses it. We become better people when we are truly grateful. How different our world would be if we all recognized our many blessings and practiced gratitude daily.

It has been said that the key to happiness is not having what you want but wanting what you have. I would say it a little differently — rather than wanting what you have, it is being grateful for what you have. Augustine said that we tend to confuse people and objects; we \textit{love} the things we ought to \textit{use} and \textit{use} the things we ought to \textit{love}.\footnote{Augustine of Hippo. \textit{Christian Doctrine}, book 3.} Theologian David Cunningham expands Augustine’s thoughts this way:

We get so wrapped up in the materials and methods that we employ to live our lives that we start treating these objects as ends in themselves — enjoying the objects themselves rather than using them to pursue worthier goals. On the other hand, we sometimes endow the truly worthy objects
of our affection – like other people and God – with a merely instrumental value, as though their primary purpose were to help us obtain lesser goods.4

Friends, gratitude can serve as an antidote to our self-oriented, self-seeking, and self-destructive tendencies. When I am truly grateful for what I have, I recognize that my happiness is not predicated on having what someone else has: possessions, relationships, or what I perceive to be advantages. If I am less envious, then I am less resentful. If I am less resentful, I am more likely to see others as people in relationship, not objects to be used.

People who practice gratefulness have better balance in their lives. Being grateful does not mean surrendering self-interest but keeping self in balance, recognizing that what is good for me must be good for those around me, too. Competition becomes more friendly and respectful. For grateful people, winning the game, the election, the argument is less important than the relationships that hold all of us together.

When we take time to count our blessings, we realize that each of us has abundant reasons to be thankful. At Church of the Saviour, we have been blessed in so many ways. We celebrate the legacy of 90 years of disciples who paved the way and handed the torch to us to carry the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world and to the next generation. Though we face challenges in our lives, in our church, and in our world, we face them together, empowered by our faith and the Holy Spirit that breathes through us and lifts us up. We fall short daily of God’s hope for us and do not deserve the blessings God generously offers, yet through Christ we experience grace and forgiveness, a gift beyond measure that reconciles us with God.

Today, we have an opportunity to offer a tangible expression of gratitude in worship. In a moment, we will make our financial commitments before God for the coming year. If you did not bring your estimate of giving card with you this morning, there are cards and envelopes provided in the pews. You can take a moment during the hymn to reflect and complete the card. We follow a Faith Giving model, which means that what you write on that card is between you and God. Retain one half for your records, and place the other half in the envelope, sealed and with your name on the outside. We will not open the envelope, but will hold it in trust, returning it to you mid-year so you can self-monitor your progress. Your church leaders are grateful for the opportunity to serve and humbled by the responsibility of stewarding the resources entrusted to us. We take our role as caretakers very seriously. This is a promise between you and God, a sacred covenant that you make to live out your faith through gratitude for God’s blessings and generosity toward participating in God’s work through your church. I am grateful for all of you and this place where together we live our faith through discipleship. Jenn and I are making the same commitment we are asking you to make today.

Being grateful is about much more than money, though giving back time, energy, and resources is an outward, tangible expression of gratitude. Make a joyful noise as you worship this morning. Remember who you are in relationship to God. Above all, give thanks. Thanksgiving is more than just one day a year. When we consider all that we are and all that we have, we can be truly and unreservedly grateful. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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