

The Royal Poinciana Chapel

Sermon By

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"COME, YE THANKFUL PEOPLE, COME!"

**Text: "Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."**

-- I Thessalonians 5:16-17

I have a simple goal today as we begin Thanksgiving week this year. I have been wandering through the attic of my thoughts. I want to share a few thoughts about why I am grateful. Perhaps it will spark you to do the same. For some it will be easier this year due to fortunate circumstances. Others will need to dig a little deeper. Of course there are many obvious reasons for our Thanksgiving: Our native land, the freedoms we have, the blessings we enjoy, our wonderful Chapel and its untiring efforts to share the Good News of Christ. Those all are true. But beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Thoreau once said, "It's not what you look at, it's what you see."

Almost everywhere you look in the world today, you can see trouble. I heard an economist the other day laying out his predictions for the New Year. It was bleak. He guessed that the financial woes and other troubles in Asia are far from over. And that the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (Russia) is being taken over by unsavory people. I read an article in the local paper this morning. It told of the situation in Russia. They are heading for winter with nothing available including the loss of hope. It could lead to anarchy. He then said Central and South America, even prior to Hurricane Mitch, have deep-seated problems and the whole region could topple. Next, he mentioned the Arabs and Israelis in the Middle East, the slaughter in Africa, Kosovo, etc. Tack onto that a possible decline in business here. . . . Wow! I got so depressed by the time he was finished I didn't know what to do.

I am a perennial optimist, but his information was hard to refute. Today I want you to focus with me on all that is positive and helpful in the world, and on all the gifts which God has given. No matter what happens in the outside, I want you to say with me inside your heart and soul: "Come, Ye Thankful People, Come."

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I. Thank you Lord . . . First, I begin with the astonishing fact that we are here. The great astro-physicist, Professor Harlow Shapley, once wrote that in light of all the possibilities through the long slow evolutionary advance of the universe, it is impossible that human life ever came to be. It could never have happened out of the huge Cataclysmic Explosion 14 billion years ago, the Big Bang which set the universe in motion, and hurled it all into outer space . . . and it is still expanding.

Others do not believe it happened that way. They say the Bible tells them so. But, we read in Genesis that God breathed into a form of life, and man and woman came to be. Then all through the remaining time He kept life moving on, permitting the freedom He instilled to break forth. He was there at each crossroads to point us on, and nudge His growing domain in the right direction. We are not puppets on a string. We exist in the Time and Providence of God as free human beings. But God is not gone.

The wonder is not that life breaks down, or that we get into trouble and disappoint each other. The

wonder is that it ever builds up to form a living, loving soul. The wonder is not death, but life. We have this precious gift, the Breath of God, on loan, for a time, to be used however we choose. But we need to say "Thank you, Lord." Our prayer each morning should be "Thank you, Lord, for the gift of another day. We did nothing to deserve it. Some of us will not have it much longer. Thank you!"

Even when times turn sour . . . give thanks in all things. Life can be unkind. . . . And life was unkind to the early Pilgrims. You don't need another recitation of all they went through in England and Holland, then crossing the ocean in the bitter cold of Cape Cod in the winter. They lived the whole first winter on a rocking little ship, freezing to death -- literally. The men went in by row boat to build a shelter. More than half of their company died before spring came that year. They had next to nothing.

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I wonder if that was just the original idea which prompted the first Thanksgiving at Plymouth Rock. In the first winter they were famished. The next, after a new harvest had come, they at least had enough to eat. Gratitude is all relative, to your expectations and experience. They were so grateful when the crops came in, they offered thanks to God. It was a miracle when the harvest came.

Maybe that is the idea of it all, that God made us in such a way, sociogenetically, that we need to give thanks, and we need someone to give it, too. Appreciation and approval of one person to another is near enough the secret to what brings and keeps us all together. The Gift of Appreciation could be the greatest gift of all. Gratitude goes both ways. It could be the secret which brought the ancient tribes together, and one that yearns to knit the human race together now. Thanksgiving is more than just a day each year we celebrate with a turkey supper and professional football games. It is at the heart of life and community.

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By the way, in these United States, there are continuing arguments about where the first Thanksgiving was celebrated. In Maine there appears to have been a day of Thanksgiving as early as 1607. There was a "Thanksgiving Day" in Virginia on the James River in 1619, to which some Indians were invited. One Florida historian makes a firm case that there was a Thanksgiving Day declared in St. Augustine as early as September 8, 1565. The Spanish explorer, Pedro Menedez de Aviles, invited the native Timucua Indians to dinner. A Thanksgiving Mass for the safety of their arrival and the warm and friendly weather was celebrated.

There are rival claims for the first Thanksgiving Day. But the one we commemorate this week was the first Thanksgiving at Plymouth Colony in 1623. In the first year in the New World, one-half of those who landed died. Then a second year went somehow by, and the time for that harvest came. They did not have much really, but it was enough to live on. The Indians came for dinner. There were just four able-bodied women available to cook the meal for 130 men. In those days men were not expected to help with the kitchen chores. I guess they watched the football games out on the Village Green.

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Governor William Bradford called for the day with his famous Thanksgiving Proclamation. Listen:

PROCLAMATION

To All Ye Pilgrims:

Inasmuch as the great Father has given us this year an abundant harvest of Indian corn, wheat, beans, squashes, and garden vegetables, and has made the forests to abound with game, and inasmuch as He has protected us from the ravages of the savages and has granted us freedom to worship God, now, I your Magistrate, do proclaim that all ye Pilgrims, with your wives and little ones, do gather at ye meeting house, between the hours of

9 and 12 in the day time, on Thursday, November ye 29th of the Year of Our Lord 1623; there to listen to ye pastor, and render thanksgiving to ye Almighty God for all His blessings.

Signed,
William Bradford
Ye Governor of ye colony

November, 1623

Just to be alive is enough. To have food and drink is more, and if ye listen to ye pastor from 9 until 12 (That's three hours), that would be an added treat.

The gift of life is the first reason to be thankful.

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II. Secondly, I focus and thank God for the kindly little things that happen in our world that bring me joy and peace. Helen Steiner Rice wrote:

"Thank you, God, for little things
That often come our way -
The things we take for granted
But don't mention when we pray -
The unexpected courtesy,
The thoughtful, kindly deed,
A hand reached out to help us
In the time of sudden need -
Make us more aware, dear God,
Of little daily graces
That come to us with sweet surprise
From never-dreamed-of places."

That little poem was in a card sent to me last Thanksgiving by someone who brought it to the Chapel. It really made my day. Curiously, it was not signed. I usually am troubled by anonymous communications from parish members, but not with this one. I hope that person is listening now. A personal note was written on the card which read, "My soul was thirsty and you quenched its thirst. You have preached His Word and I have listened. Thank you." God bless those of you who listen and

appreciate what we try to do here. Governor Bradford would be pleased.

The little things. . . . It happens in other ways to me and to you, the little things I mean. "Roverlab," a young boy in the Chapel knowing I was ill, E-mailed this weekend to make sure I was feeling fine. Thanks Christian Crandall.

And every once in a while someone says to me, "Boy, you look good today!" (They don't say it as often as they used to, I should add.) And even if they are stretching it, I love them for it. And, every once in a while someone says the sweetest words a man like me loves to hear: "Hey, I think you have lost some weight!" I go walking tall the rest of the day, even if I know I haven't. The opposite is also true. I can be feeling fine and someone says, "Are you alright? You look tired today." And my spirits droop. The little things....

The point is you and I have a choice, a constant every moment of every day choice with the people you meet: at home, at school, at work, at play, at church. You can be positive and help cheer the day, or you can stir up and pass along the sadness and anger and resentment. Mark Twain once said he could live for a week on a good compliment. I know what he means. It doesn't take much to bring happiness to another person, a kind word is free. Thank God for the little joys and sweet surprises that come your way.

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III. Then too, thirdly, in our Thanksgiving this week, it would be ungrateful not to mention the people in your life that God has given to help you through the days and years. This Thanksgiving time, thank God for your parents, or your memory of them, husbands, wives, children, friends, close relationships.

Billy Graham said in the early years of his marriage he never could figure out what his wife did all day at home with the children. "But then," he wrote, "Ruth took ill and was hospitalized for a few days.

I stayed home to take care of the children. I practically went out of my mind. Every time I turned around, there was something or someone to clean up, some argument to settle, some telephone to answer, some repairman who didn't come when he said he would. . . . I couldn't wait to get back to work!" Yeah Billy!

Some people will locate that gratitude in their friends. Friends are not easy to find; and sometimes they are harder to keep. Friends are family to many people. Don't take your friends for granted. A telephone call could be enough. A Thanksgiving card is cheap enough to buy. I can vouch for the few we received this year from out of town friends and family. It is a wonderful boost that someone remembers.

For some, Thanksgiving will include pets. My dear wife is not a fan of cats and dogs. In fact, she is allergic to them, in all senses of the word. But I have a West Highland White Terrier, a little dog named "Egg Nogg." He likes the Master of the House (Me), but he adores Peg. He follows her everywhere. He was a Christmas present from our children to me five years ago. Peggy says, "I finally reared and raised three daughters, now you bring me a dog! Egg Nogg the Dogg!! Go to Poppa, please!"

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IV. Fourthly, I often remember those who taught me back in school. I remember the ones who shared their knowledge and opened up my vision and my dreams all those years ago. E.g., I think about Isabel Sheets, who shepherded our little class through the eighth grade at Fort Pitt School in Garfield. I remember her final words to me on graduation day. She said, "Richard, I am going to miss you. God has given you many gifts. I hope you use them well." (I hope I have, too.) For years I kept in touch with her. Five decades later I still remember her.

I also think about Margaret Morrison at Peabody High School. She taught me to love prose and

poetry. She taught me how to do a book review. I never would have expanded my knowledge and love of words without her. Then there was Professor Robert P. Newman at the University of Pittsburgh, my Professor of Speech. He taught me how to think, how to organize material, how to present it, how to see both sides.

Finally, I remember Dr. Gordon E. Jackson. I was a student at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary way back then, having moseyed around a little, going this way and that. I was troubled at the easy acceptance of Biblical ideas which so many drifted into. Dr. Jackson taught me how to scrutinize the Christian faith, how to form a consistent pattern in what the Bible means; how to hold on; how to search and sift through the Scriptures to find the Word of God; how to look honestly at the stories of Jesus Christ and still not lose the Savior; how to combine head and heart and still be a theologian. He kept nudging me forward, encouraging me. Whenever I see him, although the times are few now, whenever I hear from him, and we are still in touch, I thank God I am in the ministry.

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That all leads to the ultimate reason for our Thanksgiving: for the precious gift of the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. "God so loved the world He gave His only begotten son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

The One who made the starry heavens knows you and me by name. He thinks of us as He thinks about His son. We are His children. In the life and death and resurrection of the Lord, we receive the gift of life abundant here, and the gift of life eternal. That is a lot to be grateful for -- "Come, Ye Thankful People, Come, Raise the Song of Harvest Home," for now and forevermore. Amen.

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