

Grateful in the Midst of It All

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Trinity Church in the City of Boston
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Just for fun I went to the supermarket yesterday. Not the little one near my home where I mostly buy coffee, milk and Triscuits, but a real supermarket, a big one. Thanksgiving preparations were in full swing, pandemonium had not reached full height, but it was getting close late in the afternoon. There was a sense of urgency in the air as people with large carts grabbed the standard holiday fare conveniently placed in lovely displays at the end of the aisles. It was what we have come to expect in the day before Thanksgiving — where most of the chaos is confined to the supermarket and the airports, bus stations and highways of our nation. Some of us will choose to avoid the stress and mess by staying close to home, shopping early, even dining out. But this holiday is filled with stress and mess, and some of us will embrace it, some will get through it and some will try to avoid it altogether.

Avoiding stress and mess would not have been a phrase St. Paul would ever have used in his writings. Instead, Paul instructs the local community and us this day to rejoice in the Lord always. And just in case they missed it the first time he adds, again I say rejoice. He was instructing the community on how to live with stress and mess, not avoid it, how to orient their lives and thoughts and hearts toward the God from whom all good things come. And that would be easy to do and easy to sell, were it only good things that came our way. We who sit here this morning bring our own stress and mess with us and, if you are anything like me, the challenge is always to be able to find God in the midst of it, and to give God thanks through it. To offer God thanks, and to rejoice, even when the loss is great, when the prognosis is not good, when the job disappears, when love fades or fails us or does not come at all. To offer God thanks when we feel that our bodies, or our minds, or our hearts, or our nation or our church, have disappointed us. Paul knew what we all know — that rejoicing and giving thanks are learned behaviors and we all need reminding now and then. Do it again and again and again. Until rejoicing is as normal as breathing in and breathing out. Rejoice always.

Do not worry about anything, Paul says, but by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. In other words, pray. Pray in and through everything and you will know peace. The circumstance may not change, but the peace that comes from God will make all bearable.

The peace of God is a great thing for us to hold on to in these days, especially as the stress of the next holiday comes barreling towards us. The peace of God is worth our work and our prayers in these days where peace seems noticeably absent in our world and on the streets of our city. The peace of God is worth our work and our prayers for those who do not have a place to eat, or food to share, not only on this day but everyday. The peace of God is worth our work and our prayers for those we love and those we do not even know who suffer in anyway this day. The peace of God is worth our work and our

prayers because thanksgiving (small t) is at the very heart of those who follow Jesus Christ. We say it over and over again in our Eucharistic Prayers... lines that resonate with thanks... let us give thanks to the Lord our God, it is right to give our thanks, it is right and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Almighty God.

The Gospel of John reminds us that the care of body and soul has been the work of God throughout time. That our ancestors, the Israelites, ate manna in the wilderness and that Jesus himself is the bread from heaven. It is this very bread that we will share that gives life to the world. The best meal we will share today, despite what awaits most of us later, is a bit of bread and sip of wine because it gives us strength for our journey and a foretaste of the banquet that awaits each of us.

Perhaps you are here today because you long to hold these two pieces of body and spirit together. Perhaps you are here out of habit. Perhaps you are here because someone invited, or dragged you here. Perhaps you have no idea why you are here. But God does. And the very same God who made us, and rejoices in us and delights in us and is faithful to us, is our host at this banquet of thanksgiving. And all we can say is thank you.

There was an editorial in the *New York Times* a few years ago, called “The Thanks We Give” and I keep it tucked in a folder for days like this one and the many days in-between. It reminds us that this national holiday demands that we see our lives differently. It said, “Today we try not to take for granted the things we almost always take for granted. We try, if only in that brief pause before the eating begins, to see through the well-worn patterns of our lives to what lies behind them. In other words, we try to understand how very rich we are, whether we feel very rich or not. Today is one of the few times most Americans consciously set desire aside, if only because desire is incompatible with the gratitude — not to mention the abundance — that Thanksgiving summons.” (11/25/2004)

Seeing our lives differently may be the fleeting effect of Thanksgiving Day in the pause we take before we eat. Seeing our lives differently, lives in which desire and gratitude are incompatible, is the effect of a life lived in faith, each and every day. A life lived in constant gratitude. And the effect of that is not fleeting at all.

People of faith have always known that food, fellowship and gratitude are indeed the most important things in the world. We are fed and nourished; we savor the banquet placed before us each week. A banquet that comes to us in the form of in a small wafer of bread and in a sip of the common cup. Hardly enough to fill the stomach, more than enough to fill our hearts and give us strength. People of faith have always known that fellowship matters. Fellowship acknowledges the bond we share in our Lord Jesus Christ — it makes us sisters and brothers, who like blood siblings can disagree and squabble, who can have favorites and be closer to some than others, but who in the end love their family. People of faith have always known that being grateful is a posture in which we live our lives, even when we do not get what we want or deserve, or the days are hard, or the news is bad.

To live grateful lives in the midst of stress and mess, to feast at the banquet table, to know that we are God's beloved and to give thanks even for the those things that test us, these are the makings of real Thanksgiving. To feast at the banquet prepared for us now and pause just long enough to let gratitude wash over us is the making of a good day and a good life. For we know that God is near and God's peace will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus for it is a right and a good and a joyful thing always and everywhere to give God thanks.

Happy Thanksgiving.

Amen.