

October 13, 2019 Thanksgiving sermon, CREATION plants/crops

The German mystic Meister Eckhart is reputed to have said that if the only prayer you make is "thank you," that will suffice. Thanksgiving is the virtue of interdependence, the recognition that our achievements are not fully our own, but emerge from a network of relationships that sustain and shape us, giving us the materials from which we create our experiences moment by moment.

Thanksgiving, as a spiritual practice, reminds us that all our gifts are communal as well as individual.

Many people in our society, often including each of us, are tempted these days to circle the wagons and care only for our own kin, whether in terms of school, property, or civic responsibility. While we always have an obligation to hearth and home, our gifts and talents are meant to be shared with the wider community. Thanksgiving reminds us that we are in this together; that our personal fulfillment is connected with the well-being of others, including people we may never meet. Rugged individualism is an illusion of every level of life. What is needed is innovative and responsible relatedness. What better time than during the election campaign to be reminded of this.

However, thanksgiving turns us from individualism to community and to wider and wider circles of care. It is important to remember that Paul's letters, such

as Corinthians, were written to communities and not just individuals. Paul is imagining God's harvest emerging from a small community of faith, in which each of the members matters for the well-being of the whole. Generosity is built into gratitude because in an interdependent world, there is no "other" – there is no one who is foreign to us, or ultimately separated from our well-being either as giver, cause, or receiver.

Like most parents, I teach my children to say "thank you" frequently and hope that giving thanks might become a life habit. Penny and I, and our boys will, hopefully, always cherish and remember Dakota's words of "Tank-Yooo!" After all, silent gratitude isn't much use to anyone. But I think that what I hope to teach them is not simply to say thanks, but to feel it. I believe that thankful people are happy people.

One of my favorite sayings comes from the late United Nations Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld: *For all that has been – thanks! For all that will be – yes! Yes!* If the only prayer you make is "thank you," that will be enough. And, "thank you" can be said over and over again not just to God for the blessings of this day, but to everyone whose life touches yours in a creative way. Such gratitude opens us to new blessings, but more importantly opens our hands to bless others – through a kind word as well as our time, talent, and treasure.

The late Dr. Fulton Oursler used to tell of an old woman who took care of him when he was a child – a woman who not only expressed her thanks, but felt it. Anna was a former American slave who, after emancipation, was hired by the family for many years.

He remembered her sitting at the kitchen table, her hands folded and her eyes gazing upward as she prayed, “Much obliged, Lord, for my vittles.” He asked her what vittles were and she replied that they were food and drink. He told her that she would get food and drink whether or not she gave thanks, and Anna said, “Yes, we’ll get our vittles, but it makes ‘em taste better when we’re thankful.”

She told him that an old preacher taught her, as a little girl, to always look for things to be grateful for. So, as soon as she awoke each morning, she asked herself, “What is the first thing I can be grateful for today?” Sometimes the smell of early-morning coffee perking in the kitchen found its way to her room. On those mornings, the aroma prompted her to say, “Much obliged, Lord, for the coffee. And much obliged, too, for the smell of it!”

Young Fulton grew up and left home. One day he received a message that Anna was dying. He returned home and found her in bed with her hands folded over her white sheets, just as he had seen them folded in prayer over her white apron at the kitchen table so many times before.

He wondered what she could give thanks for at a time like this. As if reading his mind, she opened her eyes and gazed at the loving faces around her bed. Then, shutting her eyes again, she said quietly, “Much obliged, Lord, for such fine friends.”

As we wrap up this season of Creation today, and we celebrate Thanksgiving, we focus on plants, crops and God’s bounty. I have learned a lot about farming over the last decade or so from various rural ministries: whether it was dairy farms, soy bean farms, wheat farms, beef farms– I have engaged and gotten my hands dirty. I have learned how fields of crops tell stories, as you pass them on the highway. I have learned how water levels and locations of sloughs tell us about irrigation issues. I’ve helped with cattle branding and inoculations. I’ve harvested durum wheat in cutting edge combines. I’ve harvested soy beans and the plight of aphids, and observed state of the art dairy farms run by robots. I also know that in order to harvest corn in the fall, you must plant it in the spring. In fact you must plant it around the start of the baseball season so that it will pollinate before the heat of summer. And provided that there is just the right amount of rain – not too much and not too little – and the right amount of sun, a bountiful harvest can be expected.

According to the apostle Paul this is exactly how thanksgiving works. The Apostle Paul is writing to the church at Corinth. Corinth is a wealthy trading centre. The Apostle is writing them to raise money for the church in Jerusalem which is in trouble. Tensions are rising in Jerusalem as Christians are being persecuted. The Romans are concerned with maintaining order. The church desperately needs help so Paul is accumulating the resources he needs to help the mother church in Jerusalem.

Since Corinth is surrounded by a rich agricultural area he made his appeal to the Corinthians with an agricultural metaphor. Just as corn seeds have to be planted in the Spring for corn to be harvested in the Fall so too must the seeds of thankfulness be planted for thanksgiving to be harvested. Those who approach Thanksgiving with a spirit of thankfulness have planted seeds of thankfulness long before. And these seeds of thankfulness have been nurtured, weeded, watered and fertilized. This has allowed them to harvest thanksgiving just in time for this big celebration. But sadly, others have failed to plant the seeds of thankfulness, or allowed them to be choked by weeds or burnt up in the sun or blown down in the wind and thus find no thankfulness to harvest at Thanksgiving.

Autumn is my favourite season. It is a mystical time with a beautiful language all its own, a language my soul understands, no translation needed. A

kind of eternal longing wells up in me that seems stronger in autumn than it does in other seasons. I love to walk in the autumn woods. I feel as though I am walking in a womb of mystery, amongst all the plants and tall trees, surrounded by life that is changing, moving on into new forms and shapes, dying that it may live again. All that is falling away motivates me to see more deeply the mystery that I am. The many changes in the world of nature are symbolic of changes happening in human hearts.

One of the things I enjoy about autumn is that, unlike myself, it looks like it's having fun surrendering. There is a playfulness about it. All those bright colours and falling leaves! As a child I would pile up leaves, jump in them, throw them in the air and wistfully follow where they would take me. The season of autumn portrays the beautiful art of surrender. The animals surrender their lives, the fields, vines, and trees hand over their grains, nuts and fruits. The hardwood trees let go of their leaves. Flowers die and grasses wither. Even the animals have to let go of their secret hiding places as the meadows are mowed for hay.

But today, we remember the bounty amidst the surrender. We close our season of Creation, remembering plants and crops. Autumn leads the seasons in modeling the sacred practice of recycling and looking after nature and earth itself. What seems to die bespeaks a quiet truth; that which falls to the earth is never lost.

The earth receives it and preserves it. Thus, it becomes a nurturing source for new beginnings as another cycle of growth arises. This miracle of transformation is autumn's prayer.

When the cool weather leads us to light our furnace's pilot light, we can take a little time to attend the pilot light of our heart. Autumn is a good season to recall some of the fallen leaves of past memories. Bring out old picture albums. Gain new life and energy by remembering people who were once sheltering trees for you, places here you went for shade and refreshment. Their leaves may have fallen, but we can still live in gratitude and appreciation of their memories. We can learn from them.

This is the attitude of gratitude and appreciation that was present in the churches established by Paul. And that is why they were so successful adding new members. Their friends and neighbours saw the changes in their lives when they became Christian.

Just imagine, what would happen if suddenly all of us, and all those who practice faith, just here in Aldergrove, began doing things for others expecting nothing in return. How would we be a face in the community, raising our visibility? What would people be saying about us? What would they be saying about the God we worship? We wouldn't have enough space in this church for all

the people looking for what we have. Remember that each time you give without expecting something in return you are planting a seed of thankfulness. These seeds will grow, and you will harvest a great joy called thanksgiving.

So, throughout the day give “thanks”. Remember those who have supported you and upon whom you depend today; notice your interchanges with others; and look for the movements of God in every interaction. Let go of old patterns of thinking that cripple and imprison you in narrow, lifeless places – surrender. This is a wonderful world of Creation that beckons us to give thanks at every turn. “Much obliged, Lord, for my vittles.” Thank you. Amen.