

## Hungry Heart To Thankful Heart

Year C

Thanksgiving Day

**USA: Fourth Thursday in November (22nd to 28th Inclusive)**

**Canada: Second Monday in October (8th to 14th Inclusive)**

Read the Bible passage: [John 6:25-35](#), The Message; or [John 6:25-35](#), The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Faith-provoking, historical insights into the lesson by [David Ewart, John 6:25-35](#).

Click here: [George Hermanson's sermon](#), for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this sermon.

The Rev. Dr. George Herman

*Note: This sermon was preached on Thanksgiving Sunday, 2007, at Edwards (Knox) United Church.*

There are a lot of traditions around our thanksgiving. It has its origins in the European festival of the harvest not the American one. It is a reflection on the bounty of the earth. It is about a sense of God we can get in work well done. It is the sense of God who loves the earth and cares for all of creation. It is the feeling that the tradition of the Sabbath created. God said it was good and beautiful, and now to rest to reflect the mode of thanksgiving. The Sabbath was the shutting out of secular demands, a time for the body as well as the soul. Rabbi Heschel said it was wrong to be sad on the Sabbath. In the moment of thanksgiving the heart moves from dissatisfaction to satisfaction - a sense of well being and fullness given by the bounty of God's grace and love.

As a child I got this in the two different customs my family followed. One was the closing of the cottage where we remembered the good times of the summer. It brought me a sense of the beauty of the earth and water that nourished us. The other custom was to go to my uncles' farm where there was joy of the harvest being finished. A celebration of what the earth had given and a spirituality where joy abounded and sense of taking time out from the pressures of the demands of everyday life, a time of play - for even if the harvest was not done they stopped the work to gather.

Good memories to have in a time of hyper-consumerism. Good memories to have in a time of frantic getting. Good memories to have in a time of cynicism and worries about whether the good times will continue. For around the edges of our time are the worries of economic collapse, environment destruction, and family tensions.

Festivals are ways we find the symbols to help orient ourselves to the realities of the world without being overcome by the negativities that emerge. Thanksgiving is placing on our hearts the God who cares for all of life. Such a festival can help us bring another vision of realism to our life together. We know death and

tragedy. Not everything works for good. Parents and children struggle. We know this and we know these things are not the last word about life. Despite outward appearances we can affirm life is blessed. The final word about existence is: It is this world that God loves.

Our passages are about the meaning of the community - church. What vision ought to motivate it and give it direction? What is the needed vision to live fully in the complexity which is our existence is the question behind the texts. You will note that a program is not offered. What is offered is a way of being - a process of living.

The question for the people in Deuteronomy now is they have experienced liberation and the promise land, now what? The answer was to remember the gift of God's love and God's claim on them. They gathered to remember with thanksgiving - to develop a heart of gratitude.

John's community finds itself in crisis. In face of persecution some wonder whether it is all worth it. They find themselves as aliens in their homeland - not much different from the experience religious people have today. John writes his gospel as a call, to a vision for the community.

In the images of bread and vine, the great "I am" statement John points to the presence of God in all human and natural experience. "I am" reminds them of the Exodus phrase where God says "I am what I am doing." This is symbol of a reality that transcends ordinary experience, is embedded in all experience. John says we can feed on God. God is the stuff of life.

We know the symbolic meaning of bread. After all we have wonder bread. John is asking us to go deeper and get behind the material needs bread feeds to what is really necessary for the fulfilling life. It is to have the courage to live out of a poetic vision, to have dreams that push us beyond the surface experiences of life. It is to be nourished on that which does not perish and that which sustains through all the shifting experiences of life. It is to feed our heart with music, art, care and faith. This is how holy wisdom comes about and how our hearts will be formed in thanksgiving.

We face two competing approaches to life. One is the feeling of indebtedness. This is where we feel we must give back because we are in debt to others. This can take religious overtones of God loves you, now you must do good. Or in family contexts it is the unspoken message of you must love me because of all I have done for you. Indebtedness can lead to higher levels of anger and lower levels of appreciation, happiness, and love. (Gray & Emmons, 2000.) When one acts out of a sense of obligation that comes from indebtedness there is an aversive psychological state that is distinct from gratitude. Gratitude is an whole different way of approaching reality. It is a sense of God within us that feels a sense of connection with others- a sense of community and unity with all around us. It is the mode of thankfulness that grounds all approaches to life.

There are some outcomes from thanksgiving that change our reality:

**Well-Being:** Grateful people report higher levels of positive emotions, life satisfaction, vitality, optimism and lower levels of depression and stress. Grateful people do not deny or ignore the negative aspects of life.

# George Hermanson

May the Lure be with you

**It is community building:** People with a strong disposition toward gratitude have the capacity to be empathic and to take the perspective of others. They are rated as more generous and more helpful by people in their social networks (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002).

**Gratitude is grounded in a faith tradition:** Those who regularly attend religious services and engage in religious activities such as prayer, reading religious material score are more likely to be grateful. Grateful people are more likely to acknowledge a belief in the interconnectedness of all life and a commitment to and responsibility to others (McCullough et. al., 2002).

**Gratitude puts materialism into perspective:** Grateful individuals place less importance on material goods; they are less likely to judge their own and others success in terms of possessions accumulated; they are less envious of wealthy persons; and are more likely to share their possessions with others relative to less grateful persons.

The vision for the church is to help create thankful hearts - to help us nurture gratitude. It is about feeding. Think of it this way - we discover a great new restaurant - the total experience feeds all the senses. We say to a friend and a stranger - "you ought to try this place." This is how the world moves to well-being.

There is never a once in a life time event that satisfies all needs. Times and circumstances change. That is why we return to the table to seek the nourishment that will fill our hungry hearts. Being feed we go out to feed the world. And to continue our feeding we return to be filled with the sense of God - and our hearts are formed in thanksgiving for the food of life. Having eaten we go out grateful for this time together - to share it with others.

(Thanks to James Murray for the reference to **Highlights from the Research Project on Gratitude and Thankfulness: Dimensions and Perspectives of Gratitude**. Co-Investigators: Robert A. Emmons, University of California, Davis, and Michael E. McCullough, University of Miami)

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