

# Thanksgiving

## Through Thick and Thin

Pastor Chip Fisher

Scripture: Philippians 4:4-13  
Matthew 5:13-16

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“God is great, God is good—now we thank Him for our food.”

“ To Whom it may concern: I am writing to thank you for going above and beyond the call of duty when we discovered our camera was missing last Monday...”

“Whitney, say “thank you” to your Aunt Donna for the treat...”

“Come, ye thankful people come...”

We teach our children to express gratitude; we try to remember ourselves freely to cultivate the habit of being thankful. The apostle Paul even commands us to “Rejoice!” Be joyful! Be grateful.

We’re most of us fairly good at being grateful when we have received abundantly; we’re not bad at being happy when the good times are rolling. But this goes much deeper: pray to God with thanksgiving when the harvest has failed, when jobs are being lost, when your dad’s dementia is getting worse, when your neighbor has cancer, when poverty and misery and civil war are ubiquitous around the globe.

A sensitive soul or serious mind has every right to raise questions about this command to “be thankful, anyway.” When we give thanks in such a world, in such times, are we being totally self-absorbed—not noticing or caring about the sufferings of so many others? Are we being naïve, pollyannish—“it’s not that bad, the economy will be fine; God will fix everything anyway, no need for me to be concerned.” Are we praying in a whisper, our eyes averted, “Thank You, God, for my good luck—I’m sorry for all those whose luck hasn’t been so good.”

Paul had none of these shortcuts in mind. He did not say, “Pray to God and He will soon fulfill your every wish. Your luck will change

immediately.” He did not say, “Act holy, and pretend you don’t care about anything and you have no passions.” (After all, Paul is the one who changed the world as very few have, before or since; Paul is the one who knew what it was to have his cup drained empty: whether by being beaten almost to death or imprisoned or going hungry or being betrayed or robbed or flogged or shipwrecked.) Paul knew suffering and privation as few have ever known it. Still, he encourages his hearers—serious in mind and heart and spirit—to pray to God with thanksgiving. To be content wherever you are with whatever you have. Not because the suffering of our others or even our own is not important; not because we care only about ourselves—but because in the end we control only our attitude, and in the end God can be trusted even with the enormity of all the dread misery in the world. God has not abandoned those in difficulty, and God has not abandoned His creation. When we pray to God with thanksgiving we acknowledge that we may not be very powerful to affect the ills of the world—but we will not be without hope, and we will not be deterred, and we are not giving up.

The prayer of a child is to ask God to change the circumstances, to manipulate life to suit him. (You’ve heard some of the children’s letters to God. From Bruce: “Dear God: Please give me a pony. I never asked for anything before. You can look it up.” Or, “Dear God and Jesus: I’m a big follower of you guys. I root for you all the time. Keep those miracles coming. Your best friend, Stephen.” From Erica, age 12: “Dear God: When I get to high school I want to be captain of the cheerleaders. Please help me make the team. PS: You would like the school. It’s Catholic.”)

When we get the pony, get the miracles, make the team, it’s easy to be thankful—not that

any of us is even very good at it then (that is, for most of us, now). But focusing on our own needs, our own circumstances, how God is treating “me,” keeps me turned inward—keeps me in the prison of my own preoccupation with me. I may not be able to change my circumstances—but I can always change my outlook. I can always look with expectancy to God.

Fortunately, those who’ve gone before us in the faith have taught us well to give thanks to God in all circumstances. George Matheson was a man who knew what it meant to trust in God. Matheson lost what little eyesight he had during his Seminary training in Glasgow in 1862, but went on to write the hymn we still sometimes sing: “O Love that Wilt Not Let Me Go.” At one point this blind preacher and poet prayed, “My God, I have never thanked Thee for my thorns. I have thanked Thee a thousand times for my roses, but not once for my thorns. I have been looking forward to a world where I shall get compensation for my cross, but I have never thought of my cross as itself a present glory. Teach me the glory of my cross; teach me the value of my thorn. Show me that I have climbed to Thee by the path of my pain. Show me that my tears have made my rainbow.”

Another who well knew what it was to trust in God not just when life was easy and bright but during the darkness as well was President Abraham Lincoln. During the depths of the Civil War, during his Thanksgiving Declaration in 1863, Lincoln declared, “[It is] announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations are blessed whose god is the Lord...It has seemed to me fit and proper that God should be solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged, as with one heart and one voice, by the whole American people.” Lincoln was all too well acquainted with grief; his prayers reflected neither a petty egotism little concerned for others nor a denial as to the scope of the misery. His reverent prayers acknowledged that God had not abandoned the Union—or the Confederacy either—and that God could be trusted even while slavery was still a scourge, and the war was going badly, and hundreds of thousands of fine young men were being killed each year, and the future of the nation looked

almost hopeless. Lincoln would not abandon hope, and he would not abandon His trust in God. He urged “the whole American people, with one heart and one voice,” to do likewise.

I hope you are not surprised that Lincoln used the national observance of Thanksgiving publicly to encourage all Americans to turn again on our knees to God. The idea that religion should remain a private affair and is somehow supposed to out of bounds in politics or in public would have come as a surprise to Lincoln, and to James Madison, called “the Father of the Constitution,” who proclaimed two separate days of national thanksgiving for the end of the War of 1812.

It would have come as a surprise to our first president George Washington that it is poor form publicly to call a nation to thanksgiving to God. Washington in fact did call a national day of Thanksgiving to God in October, 1789, and proclaimed, in part, “...it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits... therefore I do assign Thursday the 26<sup>th</sup> day of November next to be devoted by the People of these states to the service of that great and glorious Being.”

And we in the Congregational tradition should especially know about the origins of Thanksgiving in this country; it was our ancestors in the faith who initiated the observance which Washington, Madison, Lincoln, and so many others have followed. [[Last year I cited quotations from one of several recent books blatantly rewriting our national history to be politically correct—if you’re curious, that sermon’s on our website. For one example, a children’s book called *The First Thanksgiving* by Jean Craighead George emphasizes “the Pilgrims left Europe to “seek their fortune in the new world.” Had she ever read or referred to the diary of Pilgrim leader William Bradford, who had the advantage of being there, she would have known the Pilgrims’ voyage was inspired by “a great hope...for advancing the kingdom of Christ.” I will leave you all to deduce the motives of an author who cares so little for truth, and of the schools and libraries which buy and teach and circulate such books.]]

Let's begin our exploration of Thanksgiving back in England during the time of Queen Elizabeth: the early 1600's. There was one state church, the Church of England. All worship was to take place in these approved buildings; all prayers were to be prayed according to those written in the Book of Common Prayer. The Church Institution hummed along, with two related causes of internal friction. There were maybe a thousand believers across the land who recognized only Jesus—no human king or queen—as sovereign. They talked about experiencing Jesus thru a personal encounter with His Spirit; “going to church” was not enough for them. These radicals believed the church organization was too corrupt to be purified. They chose to separate themselves from the church, and to worship in their own fashion—and became therefore known as “Separatists” (who soon also became known also as the “Pilgrims” since they were making religious pilgrimage to the New World.) They understood themselves to be followers of Jesus as those in the New Testament had been.

Queen Elizabeth protected them somewhat; when she died James I came to the throne. The Bishops, anxious that this troublesome movement be forcefully stamped out, prevailed. The Separatists were tortured, executed, thrown in prison, banished, and otherwise abused.

[[A group of several hundred from a local church from village of Scrooby in the Midlands of England emigrated to Holland in 1608 so they could worship God without being persecuted. Twelve years later, 41 members of this same congregation joined 58 other Separatists from the same English congregation and emigrated to the “New World.” Sir Walter Raleigh had described for them the ease of life in Guiana, with its perpetual tropical climate and abundance of fruit. These Separatists were aware that the death rate at Jamestown was still above 50% in 1620—but they prayed and sought the will of God—and resolved to set up a colony in what came to be called, for obvious reasons, New England. (Governor William Bradford acknowledged the mortal dangers they faced, later writing that “...Their ends were good and honorable,...and therefore they might expect

the blessing of God on their proceeding; yea, thou they should lose their lives in this action, they might have comfort in the same...” These Pilgrims were ready to give up their lives for one another and in obedience to God in this sacred venture before they ever left England; they had already signed a covenant pledging themselves to this effect.)

You may already know: horrible and prolonged Atlantic storms continued for weeks at a time; those 100 Separatists crossing on the Mayflower were crammed belowdecks where there was barely headroom to stand up for 66 days in a space no bigger than Mertz Hall. For weeks at a time they had no hot food, no fresh air; it was non-stop crying children and babies, ill-lit, foul-smelling—a rolling, pitching, stinking inferno. To survive these hellish circumstances they gathered and sang together the Psalms of Thanksgiving; they prayed without ceasing even in their illness and despair. (One of the several spiteful sailors, taking pleasure in their seasickness, called them “psalm-singing puke-stockings” and kept taunting that they would be soon be feeding their dead bodies to the fish. Unfortunately he caught and died of a sudden illness within one day. After that the crew quit making fun of those seasick Pilgrims.) But 102 arrived, Oceanus Hopkins being born at sea and Peregrine (a synonym for “Pilgrim”) White being born off Cape Cod.]]

After a very rough passage the Pilgrims dropped anchor November 11, 1620, off Cape Cod in the midst of winter, and since they had been cheated and delayed before they left England they had already eaten much of their first year's rations. Nonetheless, they knelt and gave thanks to God on that freezing shore. Due to cold, malnutrition, pneumonia, starvation and other ills, 13 of the 24 husbands died and 13 of the 18 wives died during that first winter. By spring, only a few men and boys were left to plant seeds, and meals were a bare few kernels. Yet when the Mayflower returned to England and offered free passage to all survivors, not a one chose to go back. They had signed a covenant with each other in the sight of God, and they meant to keep it. They chose, even in the midst of this killing hardship, to continue to give thanks to God.

If you read the story of how they survived that first year, it's enough to think God did keep those miracles coming. While they did not receive a pony, God did bring them Samoset, an Algonquin who spoke perfect English, walking into their feeble encampment one Friday in mid-March of 1621. (Samoset then brought Squanto to them; he taught them how to plant, how to catch fish and eels, how to survive. He told them how they had landed on the land of the Pawtuxets, who had been hostile and powerful—but four years prior a plague had killed them all—and so completely, none of the neighboring tribes had moved in to claim the land on which Plymouth was established.) Their harvest of that year, 1621, was so plentiful that Governor William Bradford declared a day of public Thanksgiving to God.

[[They invited Chief Massasoit, who showed up a day early with 90 of his Indians! Those Pilgrims did what they did best when overwhelmed. Immediately they prayed—their harvest hadn't been *this* spectacular—but fortunately the Native Americans knew it was actually a potluck, and brought five dressed deer and a dozen plump wild turkeys.]]

Their celebration of thanks—to God for their survival and for the Indians—ended up lasting several more days. What the Pilgrims later remembered was the heartfelt prayer of their acting pastor William Brewster, thanking God for providing for them when they trusted well and when they had faltered in trust: still God had brought them across the sea and thru their first winter alive; God had met and gathered to Himself in death those who had not survived; God had provided for their rich harvest and for the blessing of Indians predisposed to help them—when the result with settlers to the south had been often fatal. [My accounts of this Pilgrim history come from [The Light and the Glory](#), by David Manuel and Peter Marshall, 1977, Revell Publishers.]

The Pilgrims could not affect the stormy seas or the winter climate. But they could and did continue to worship God faithfully thru the first year, and long thereafter, and to offer their Him their heartfelt prayers of Thanksgiving. Often, in

dire desperation, it was all they could do. They controlled their attitude if not their surroundings. They continued to trust that God was sufficient, in life and in death.

I'll bet you didn't know about what I'm calling a second Thanksgiving. Back in England in the 1620's, these Separatists had begun to break away. The second faction of radicals were called, derisively at first, the "Puritans," since they had hoped to stay within and purify the Church of England. The Puritans were more numerous, more prosperous, and better educated than the Separatists had been. But they, too, had almost every one come to the point of decision where they chose freely to enter into a covenant with God thru Christ; they had experienced the living God in such a way that "playing church" was no longer satisfactory; the Holy Spirit had changed their lives irrevocably and they would never turn back. Even as they were persecuted, hounded, vilified—they would seek His will, seek to obey God in all things. Many were to risk their lives for Him, but they would not turn back.

In 1628 Bishop William Laud, Bishop of London, caused a law to be passed under Charles I, essentially forcing out of their churches (and out of their homes and land and out of England) all those clergy he deemed "Puritans." Soon all Puritans were forced to leave their country. It became impossible for them to purify the Church from within—they were all kicked out! As they prayed, it began to make sense to try to go to New England—they could still be faithful to their Church of England, but they hoped without the being tortured and oppressed part.

One of the tens of thousands of Puritans to leave in that initial wave was John Winthrop. Educated at Cambridge, he owned a significant estate in Suffolk. In his diary he had written, years before, "I do resolve to give myself—my life, my wits, my health, my wealth—to the service of my God and Savior who, by giving Himself to me and for me, deserves whatsoever I am or can be, to be at His command and for His glory."

He believed God's assignment for him was for him to continue to purify and reform Christ's

Church—but in New England. In fact he was chosen by the Massachusetts Bay Company to arrange for passage of more than a thousand Puritans eager to emigrate, and also to serve as Governor of the “plantation” they had established at Salem. (Both he and his wife of 25 years, Margaret, sensed God had not called her forth. So she stayed back in England—both of them eager to obey the will of God, no matter the cost.) Winthrop and the others listened to a rousing farewell sermon by rising the Puritan minister named John Cotton, who inspired “these new children of Israel with the belief that they were the Lord’s chosen people; destined, if they kept the covenant with Him, to people and [fructify] this new Canaan in the western wilderness.” (Samuel Eliot Morrison’s summary of the sermon, quoted in *The Light and the Glory*, p. 157.)

It was with a heavy heart that Governor Winthrop approached the Puritan colony of Salem, Massachusetts on June 12, 1630, after 72 days on the *Arbella*. (When the initial population of Salem exceeded 1000 settlers, the successive overflow of Puritans began to settle in another little colony called Boston.)

Winthrop could barely believe his eyes. This collection of tents and shanties was the famed colony of Salem, the stronghold of the people of God he had been hearing about? The residents were alive but listless, sleepwalking without energy or purpose. Shellshocked. Many had died during the winter, though they had not starved. Winthrop was perplexed: these were not fortune-hunters as those who had failed in Jamestown, but Puritans. Outgoing Governor Endecott told him, sure enough, they worshiped twice every Sunday and went to a teaching service every Thursday. They heard solid preaching. But it seemed to do them no good.

Puzzled, back aboard the *Arbella*, Winthrop prayed anew. He well knew the Mayflower compact the Pilgrims had agreed to in 1620, and shared its unheard-of tenets to see all as equal members to be governed by their own consent, gathered in obedience to God. He added to it, however, in his new charter by which he would lead these failing

Puritans in Salem to live together.

He wrote out his ideas about covenant love: how the love among covenanting Christians is “a real thing, not imaginary... We are a company, professing ourselves fellow members of Christ, and... we ought to account ourselves knit together by this bond of love.” “We are entered into covenant with Him for this work... the Lord hath given us [the chance] to draw our own [governing principles]. “The only way to avoid shipwreck and to provide for our posterity [is for us to] be knit together in this work as one man... as members of the same body... We shall then find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies,... For we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill.” (from Winthrop’s document “A Model of Christian Charity.”)

He had learned how the thriving Plymouth Plantation treasured their right to choose their own church leaders, and how, unlike in England, their civil authority was distinct from their church leadership. (The day before election day in Plymouth, William Bradford declared that no one should work but that everyone should use the day pray, to discern whom God would have them vote into office. (Perhaps you recognize these principles to be foundational both to our Congregational Church and to the future government of the United States.)

Winthrop, an aristocratic landholder, didn’t just write documents. He worked with his hands and planted and plowed—and he soon required every other aristocrat also to join in the work even though they could afford to pay someone else to do their share of work for them. (This understanding was also unheard of, and his upperclass peers who had never worked manual labor in their lives and had never intended to—were incredulous and furious. But Winthrop recognized and spelled out and lived out what it meant to live in Christian covenant community. No lords or ladies, no landed gentry, no yeomen, no serfs or servants or slaves—but only equal members in Christ’s Church: we children of this understanding cannot fathom how unthinkably revolutionary this was!) Winthrop

considered tardiness, even to go out to work in the field, to be blasphemy, since they had all covenanted to serve God: he said “this is God’s work; to steal His time is to blaspheme against what He is trying to accomplish here.” His strong example and leadership turned Salem around. (They would eventually run into difficulties of a different sort.)

His covenant to God and his heart of thanksgiving did not falter even as once again circumstances around him nosedived. He remained an ocean apart from his beloved wife. His son Henry was drowned in a fishing accident just days after arriving in New England. Even then he wrote to Margaret, “I thank God, I like so well to be here...If I were to come again, I would not have altered my course, though I had foreseen all these afflictions...I have never had more contentedness of mind.” A man giving thanks, trusting God, even in great difficulty.

Salem became far more successful—but boatload after boatload of Puritans kept arriving (some 20,000 came into New England in the 1630’s) and few came with any food or provisions. There was nothing to buy even had people brought money. Salem was overwhelmed and cut off. Anticipating the winter, Winthrop had sent the *Lyon* back to Bristol in September, 1630, promising to pay for the needed supplies from his own now-depleted estate. He sent a tiny boat and ambassadors to barter with the Indians, but the hundred bushels of corn they received lasted only a short time among so many. (He had given his covenant promise; he committed everything he had to God’s covenant community. John Winthrop was widely reckoned, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, to rank behind only George Washington in popular respect and stature as a “founding father.”)

By February 4, 1631, in the dead of winter, all the corn was gone, all the nuts had been scavenged and consumed, all the clambanks were depleted. The *Lyon* had not returned; it was assumed shipwrecked. They declared February 6 to be a day of fasting and humiliation—those Puritans repented, all searching their hearts to become aware of why God might be withholding divine favor from them. They prayed for a miracle—they knew that

God was their only hope.

The day of fasting never arrived. February 5 saw a fully-laden ship entering the Salem harbor. It turned out to be the *Lyon*, stored full with wheat, oatmeal, beef, pork, cheese, butter, tea—and casks of lemon juice, critical to those sick with scurvy. February 6, 1631 instead was declared to be a day of Thanksgiving to God.

In good times and in bad: Happy Thanksgiving.

### **Matthew 5:14-16**

“[Jesus continued to his disciples,] “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

### **Philippians 4:3-14**

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you...for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.