

## **“Exiting with Thanksgiving, Too”**

Psalm 100; Philippians 4:4-9

November 18, 2007

Last year, Amy and I had one of those “great” ideas that when you look back on it might not have been the best idea in the world. We could have gone to North Carolina to celebrate Thanksgiving – its only 5 hours away, but it would have been a nice diversion ... but we didn’t. We could have Thanksgiving with Amy’s mom at her house ... but we didn’t. We could have gone to my parent’s house and partaken of their annual feast at the Golden Coral ... but for some reason that didn’t seem appealing to us. No, we thought it would be nice if both of our families gathered at the parsonage to share in our first Thanksgiving as a family.

Now, to be honest, I was surprised that my sister and her family took us up on this offer because they live west of Atlanta, but the four of them packed up and headed to our house. And so, our home was now filled with 2 dogs, 2 young girls, and four adults on Thanksgiving morning. But that was fine and a little fun. And then my parents and my other sister said they would come. And, Amy’s mom said she would come – but her dad was out of town. And, so for our first thanksgiving together, we had eight adults, 2 children, and 2 dogs.

Now, I must say that I am thankful for our parsonage, and the fact it was designed for big meals ... but this was definitely stretching things. We quickly decided that cooking the turkey was out of our league and delegated that to Mrs. Justice. And my sister is a master cake maker so she brought dessert and helped make some of the vegetables, like okra, because I like her take on them. And my mom brought some of her specialties too. And really, all Amy and I – ok, Amy – had to do was make mashed potatoes and open a can of cranberry sauce and warm up everything.

That seems kind of nice. But as we gathered together, I quickly discovered something I had not anticipated: it fell on me to slice the turkey. I don’t know why. I’m certain that my family knew better. They had watched me butcher many a birthday cake in my life to the point that I gave up using a knife and just used a fork because it was an improvement. I have never cut off any of my fingers, but that is only because I have rarely used a knife that was that sharp.

And so, here I am being handed this huge knife and fork to cut up this beautifully prepared turkey. The dogs are all over me, my family is hungry, and I am staring at this basted bird trying to figure out how to start – and quite aware that everyone is watching me with bemusement.

I honestly don’t know what happened after that. I don’t know if I did a good job or not. But everyone got some turkey, I still have all my fingers and toes, and the dogs only received scraps.

Around 2 pm, everyone was exhausted, the kitchen, dining room, and part of our den was a mess. And, at this point, everyone started leaving. And for the first time all day, I was thankful.

Psalm 100 talks about entering the Lord’s gates with thanksgiving in our hearts. I understand that, but last year, I was singing about people exiting Hank’s gates with thanksgiving in my heart!

Looking back, Amy and I were really trying to capture the heart of thanksgiving. We were excited about beginning our new life together, and we wanted to share that with our family. We were thankful for the many ways we had been blessed. And we wanted to show off our fine china and crystal which we used that one and only time since we received it. But thanksgiving was in our hearts.

And then Thanksgiving came and it all went away.

This is the kind of week we are about to enter into. It is suppose to be just a day of prayer and thanking God for all that we have been blessed with. It is suppose to be a day of rest. In fact, if you go really far back, this kind of day was suppose to be accompanied by fasting – but we don't like to talk about that.

Instead, we do the opposite. We gorge ourselves with food – and surprisingly only gain about a pound in the process. The L-tryptophan that we consume makes us sleepy. And with family and cleaning up, the day becomes a cacophony of talking, and cleaning, and worrying. And if your family is anything like mine, thanksgiving really is only given in a very short prayer just before the meal.

It seems like, for Americans, the minute we involve food, we lose track of what the event is about and instead focus on the celebration. Think about planning a wedding, a birthday party, any holiday with food, or even having a funeral wake, and how most of the conflicts are not over the actual event, but the meal, the reception ... the food. We lose our focus so easily because we all want to do everything right. But right, when it comes to giving God thanks, is stopping. "Be still and know that I am God" is how Scripture puts it. We forget that when there is food on the table. Maybe that is why the Jews fasted when they gave thanks. Seems reasonable.

Now, I'm not suggesting you boycott the grocery stores, uninvited your family, use paper plates, go to the Golden Coral or any of the like. What I am is bringing something to your attention: this is what we do for every religious holiday. We cover it up with food and family and tinsel and pilgrims, and in the process – somehow – lose the meaning of the event.

I don't see this as some move by secular forces to marginalize Christianity. I don't see this as vast conspiracy by grocery stores and pottery barn and Wal-mart – although I'm not going to give them a complete pass. But it is just what we do. In the midst of all the craziness to try to make a day special, we forget the whole purpose of the day. At Christmas, it is the presents and the decorations. At Easter, it is new clothes and hats and Easter baskets and bunnies.

But what if it was about thanksgiving this year? What if it was about giving God thanks for how good He is all the time, about how spoiled we are by our Father in heaven, about how little we even realize and certainly how little we stop to think about how blessed we really are. Could we do that without the food, the family, and the football game?

In Deuteronomy, God explains how he desires the people to give him thanks. He asks them to give the first fruits of the crop to Him. If you didn't know this, the first harvest is rarely the best. In fact, many times they are sour. But they are greatly desired. They are the result of patience

and hard work. For farmers, they are the first opportunity to make a profit. For amateur gardeners, they are a chance to taste their tomatoes.

But God said, no, I want to be first. I want to the most important place in your lives. The tithe was not to be simply 10% but the first 10% of your income. (Direct depositing kind of makes that a little difficult, but it is and always has been a spiritual thing rather than a literal thing.) God says time and time again that He is a jealous God. To place Him second is repugnant and a waste of our time. Go to Cain and Able, and see which of the offerings God showed favor. Both made an offering, but it was the first of the animals of Able that God thought was better.

This is the challenge of Thanksgiving and, honestly, all of the holidays: how do we place God first? How do we give God the correct position of honor and glory without losing our traditions? I think it is, like our tithe, a mental thing - or more precisely, a spiritual decision. It is us saying to God, "This day is about you. We are coming together because of you." It is us deciding in our souls that Thursday is not about us but about us giving thanks. If that is our priority, if that is our focus, slicing the turkey, dealing with tons of relatives, cleaning up huge messes, and being exhausted as the afternoon comes isn't an issue.

I'm not going to say how we as Americans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century give thanks is the most biblical way. I'm not going to say it is the most effective way either. But I will say it is possible to give God thanks as we enter this special day. And it is possible to exit the day giving thanks too. It is just a decision we each have to make as we come to Thursday of this week. We have to say, "This is a day that is about God and really nothing else." You can begin the day with prayer and bible study. You can make a point of explaining to your family what this day means. Thanksgiving can be a day of giving thanks instead of a 30 second prayer. But only if we want it to be such a day.

My hope is that your Thanksgiving won't be like mine last year – with the first chance you really give thanks is at 2 pm after everyone has left and you are totally exhausted. In that case, it really is summed up in one sentence: "Thank God that's over." Not really a word of thanksgiving. But that's only the case because we lose track of what is all about.

The beauty of this day – something that neither George Washington or Abraham Lincoln lost when they established a national day of thanks giving – is that it is for us a moment to stop and not say, "Thank God", but rather, with sincerity, "Thank you, God." It is a moment of pause to realize how blessed we are. About this time every year some one will always say, "We really should give thanks every day" and that is a fair statement. But there is something beautiful about coming together as God's people together to say thanks.

But like most beautiful things, if you move too fast, you will miss them. And with family coming in town – or you traveling out of town – and vegetables on the stove and a turkey in the oven or being fried or Bbq-ed or however you do it, and need to keep everything straightened up, and putting on nice clothes that are way too hot for the occasion here in south GA, and the tv on to the parades and the game, things are in a constant state of motion. We can't be still. We miss the best part.

I implore you this year not to miss the best part. Do everything in your power to hold onto the only thing that really matters about this day. Star your day by giving thanks. Think about what this day is about. And perhaps in the chaos of everything, maybe you will get a glimpse of its beauty. But you will have to try because it's not easy. Nothing worth experiencing ever is.

The holidays can be hard days to celebrate God. But maybe that is our fault. Probably that is our fault. Actually, it is all our fault.