

Homily – A Thanksgiving to Remember

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I think it is fascinating that over the years, our holidays shift and morph so that they are nothing like they were one hundred year ago.

As followers of Jesus I think we are all aware of how Christmas and Easter have shifted. These two holidays celebrate the birth and resurrection of Jesus, two events that changed the universe forever. But, somehow these holidays have become about shopping and candy baskets. For many, the spiritual components of Christmas and Easter have been completely eliminated. As followers of Jesus we would love to reclaim these holidays, and we have some work to continue making these holidays about Jesus.

Curiously over the years Thanksgiving has also shifted. It started with the myth of a partnership between those who came from Europe on the Mayflower and the indigenous native peoples who were already living in the land we now call Massachusetts. George Washington attempted to start a Thanksgiving holiday as a day of gratitude and prayer, but it did not stick. It wasn't until 1863 during the American Civil War that Abraham Lincoln was convinced to start the Thanksgiving holiday that we have today. It was a holiday that was intended to help heal a divided nation, but at the same time it white washed the true story of the genocide of indigenous native peoples, a people who were not permitted to become U.S. citizens and vote until 1924. I wonder if we can shift Thanksgiving. There is no need to make Thanksgiving about a false past. Instead, we can remember and atone for the sins of our past, and reclaim Thanksgiving as a day of gratitude and prayer.

Over the last few years, a lot of attention has paid to the benefits of gratitude. Gratitude is an act of self-compassion, because it increases our happiness and well-being at no cost to ourselves whatsoever. Scientific research suggests grateful people are happier, have more positive relationships, cope better with adversity and exhibit more pro-social tendencies. The greater the gratitude that people have in their lives, the more it will impact their connections and relationships with others. Thankfully, gratitude is a skill that can be developed and strengthened over time, almost like a muscle. This evening I want to share spiritual practices that cultivate gratitude. And, to cultivate gratitude, we can begin with family and friends, since it is easiest to see how they benefit us. Then we can move on to strangers, where it is a bit harder to see the benefit we receive from them. Finally, when we are ready, we can take on the most difficult task, which is cultivating gratitude in relation to those who have caused us harm

Gratitude starts with remembering that everything, I repeat everything, is a gift from God. Through God's boundless grace and love we are blessed in ways that we know and in ways that we do not know. We are blessed with life and death, family and friends, resources and gifts. We are blessed with memory, reason, and skill. God's blessings keep going and going, and our response is to thank God. Never stop thanking God.

The next step is to cultivate gratitude with regard to those we love. If we reflect closely, we may find that even in the case of our loved ones, we tend to take things for granted and to minimize the full scope of the role they play and have played in our lives. Opening ourselves to gratitude means opening the door to being utterly amazed at the countless ways others have supported us and continue to support us. It means gradually realizing that we could never survive, much less thrive, without the constant support and care of others. This recognition can lead to a profound sense of humility, a deep appreciation for others and a wish to repay their kindness, which paves the way for genuine compassion.

In marriage counseling, when clients are asked what percentage they contribute to their relationship, most people say sixty percent. Clearly, it is not possible for each partner to contribute sixty percent to the relationship. This is only one way that we over-inflate ourselves and take others for granted. When we think of our accomplishments in life, do we recognize the myriad individuals who made each accomplishment possible – most of whom we probably do not even know personally?

An example of a practice that helps us recognize the ways we truly benefit from others is the contemplative practice of Naikan, which originated in Japan. In this practice, we bring to mind a person in our life, usually beginning with our primary caregiver, such as our mother or father. We then ask three questions: "What have I received from this person?", "What have I given in return?", and "What trouble have I caused them?" Naikan uses memory along these structured questions to help us see how much we take for granted and how much support we have received from others over the course of our lifetime. But, your primary care giver is just the start of the spiritual exercise. Now, extend your reflection to other whom you love. Again the three questions are: "What have I received from this person?", "What have I given in return?", and "What trouble have I caused them?" It can be eye-opening to realize how much time and energy people have spent on us. If we engage in this process sincerely, we will likely feel moved to a degree by the care that has been shown to us – care that we previously took for granted. We may begin to realize that without the constant help of family, friends and strangers, we would not be able to lead our lives and be happy. When we recognize this, it may shift our attitude toward genuine gratitude and appreciation.

Furthermore, we may come to a deeper understanding of how valuable we are in the eyes of others. When we see that value, it may lead us to value our own life more, filling us with a greater self-confidence as well as a desire to make use of our life, in which so much has been invested, to return that kindness by benefiting others and making the most of our opportunities. My hope and prayer is that our community here at St. Barnabas is a place where we can love and support one another, just as God loves us.

Now, those skilled in the spiritual practice of Naikan can use this method to cultivate gratitude for strangers and over time even enemies. Through Christ we are all connected to one another. Every single person who has ever lived, has been made in the image of God and has Christ in and around them. Do you see Christ in strangers? Do you see Christ even in your enemies?

What would our lives be like if we could extend our gratitude toward our enemies or those people we find very difficult? I should point out that we are not attempting to justify or feel grateful for the harm that was caused. Harm and wrong actions should be recognized as such. Rather, we are seeing if we can connect with the person who caused the harm and develop a human connection with them. This separation of the act from the actor is an important distinction. As we think of these difficult people we should ask ourselves, "Has the person who harmed me ever done anything that benefited me?" Often when we feel wronged, it is by individuals who are close to us and who have actually done many things to benefit us in the past. When we feel wronged and angry, we lose sight of these things, only seeing the hurt and the harmful actions. When we contextualize this and recognize the benefits we also received, we may gradually feel more inclined to forgive the other, and we may even be able to cultivate genuine gratitude for them, recognizing the good things they did to benefit us. This is a difficult process that may take time, and in the beginning it may even seem impossible. If this is a process you wish to engage in, it can be very beneficial to read stories of forgiveness and gratitude. And is there any better story than the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus?

Another spiritual practice or exercise is to contemplate whether we have benefited from the negative interaction with the person who has harmed us. For example, often a break up in a relationship may lead to positive outcomes, or losing one job leads to other opportunities. We also learn a great deal about ourselves and develop resilience when going through difficult circumstances. And, sometimes all we can say from watching another person's bad behavior is that that person taught us how not to behave. That too is valuable.

Once we consider all these ways of cultivating gratitude, we see that there is no limit to the amount of gratitude we can experience toward others. Since gratitude is

directly related to happiness, cultivating gratitude in these ways can greatly improve our well-being, our outlook on life and our relationships with others. Like forgiveness, gratitude is something we can go on to cultivate more and more of throughout our life. So if we care about ourselves and want more happiness in our life, we would do well to sincerely make an effort to cultivate more gratitude.

I pray that we can rebrand our Thanksgiving holiday away from Pilgrims and Indians. As was envisioned by George Washington, I pray that we can make this holiday about gratitude and prayer. I pray that we can see the blessings we already have from God. And, I pray that we see Christ in all. Happy Thanksgiving.

This sermon is based on Class Six of Compassion Integrity Trainings by Life University.