

Thanksgiving Gifts (TG Series 3)

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 & 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

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First Presbyterian, Luling

I'm letting you in on a preacher secret. Actually, it's just my secret; I don't know if other preachers have this experience or not. Here it is. I'll have what I think is the most brilliant and creative idea for a sermon series. I'll outline it all out. I'll announce it to you, hoping you'll be excited about it, too. And then about halfway through, I'll run way down on my level of enthusiasm. By the end, I'm just ready for it to be over, because I have absolutely nothing else to say on the subject that seemed so creative and brilliant a few short weeks before.

This Thanksgiving series has been different. After today, I'm still going to have several thoughts and angles that could be sermons all by themselves. I'm doing my best to resist the temptation to dump all those extra thoughts in this sermon. There will be other Sundays and other sermons and plenty of times to be thankful and reflect about being thankful.

Thanksgiving Gifts. This is the sermon that sparked the series, so in a way I've been thinking about it for the longest. Gifts are obviously not what we associate with the Thanksgiving holiday. Gifts are for Christmas and birthdays and anniversaries, but nobody has ever given me a Thanksgiving present. But the act of giving thanks, the attitude of being grateful, the cultivation of gratitude—those have all given me gifts, gifts I did not anticipate.

First, cultivating an attitude of gratitude expands our capacity to be thankful. That is, the more we are thankful, the more things we find to be thankful for. Just like the ideas for a thanksgiving sermon series seemed to keep expanding and growing, our thoughts and attitudes and orientation toward thankfulness feeds on itself and keeps growing. Being thankful, practicing gratitude, is a way to exercise our thankful muscles, so that they become stronger and more intentional. When we're accustomed to being thankful, we find more and more things to be thankful for.

Being thankful, intentionally grateful, also gives us the gift of mindfulness, of paying attention. We notice things we might have otherwise overlooked, we take stock of things we used to take for granted, we fill our days with thoughts of gratitude for even the most mundane things.

Which leads to the next gift of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving, a growing orientation to gratitude, is the best antidote to worrying and fretting and fear. When we put time and energy and those swirling thoughts in our brains to the project of thinking of things we are thankful for, reasons we are thankful, it roots us firmly in the present, in the here and now, and doesn't leave space for fretting and worrying about the future. When we're thankful for the gifts that today brings us, we don't get caught up in fear about tomorrow.

Those gifts we receive from being thankful: the increased capacity for gratitude; the mindfulness; the antidote to worrying—those gifts are in and of themselves something to be grateful for. But if we stop just with being vaguely thankful for the gifts of gratitude, I think we're missing two important parts of thanksgiving gifts.

The first thing we're missing is a who. To whom are we thankful. We can, I suppose, just go around being vaguely and generally grateful. But who is the giver of all these things we are thankful for? Who is the sender of blessings? Who is it that not just sends the things, but gives

us those gifts we named: who is it that expands our capacity for gratitude? Who is it that brings all of those things to our attention? Who is it that shoos the worries and fears out of our minds and fills us up with gratitude? To whom are we grateful? To God, of course. But often, too often, we stop as if “I’m thankful” is a completed thought. “I’m thankful for my blessings” is also not quite complete. “I’m thankful to God for my blessings” is getting there. That’s the first thing we might miss if we just stop at the Thanksgiving gifts we receive.

The other thing we miss is that Thanksgiving gifts are not meant to just be appreciated and then ignored. Thanksgiving gifts, like any gift we receive from God, is meant to be responded to. Thanksgiving gifts, blessings from God, are not meant to stop with us. They’re meant to be returned to God, shared with our neighbors. Both of our Scripture readings this morning speak to that. The Deuteronomy passage instructs God’s people to bring the first fruits of their harvest to the priest, to recite all of the ways God has blessed them, to be thankful. And then it instructs them to lay their offering down for God. The things that they are thankful for are to be returned to God, are not to be kept to themselves, not to be hoarded in any way. They aren’t supposed to just feel thankful, but to be thankful, with action.

In a similar way the Second Corinthians passage reminds the Christians in Corinth to not just stop with gratitude, but to share the blessings and gifts they enjoy. “And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work”

This shouldn’t have been new instructions to either the ancient Israelites nor the Corinthians. Their story, back in the beginnings, involved blessings and promises to Abraham, who was blessed so that he could be a blessing to all the families of the earth. (Gen 12:3).

We are not supposed to keep our thanksgivings to ourselves, nor our gratitude, nor our blessings. We are meant to offer them—and ourselves—for God’s use. We are meant to share them. We are meant to use our blessings in order to bless our neighbors.

I’ve been working on my Spanish online, and though there are plenty of words in Spanish for thanks and gratitude and giving thanks, I learned one interesting thing recently. Though Thanksgiving Day, in its United States version, isn’t celebrated in Spanish speaking countries, there are plenty of Spanish speakers in the United States who do celebrate Thanksgiving Day. And when they do, it is called “Dia de Accion de Gracias,” which if you’re going to translate that literally, means “day of action of thanks.” Day of action of thanks. Thanksgiving is not just a feeling. It’s an action, an action of offering gratitude to God, and an action of offering blessings to our neighbors.

We receive the gifts of thanksgiving, and we give the gifts of thanksgiving. Thanks be to God.