

Church of the Crossroads  
Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Thanksgiving Sunday  
November 18, 2007  
Neal MacPherson

## GRATITUDE AND THE GRACE OF DEPENDENCY

Deuteronomy 8:11–20

Psalm 100

Philippians 4:4–9

Matthew 6:25–34

Recently, I have been thinking about how our liturgical year sets a pattern for our lives that is quite different from the way our society functions. This is perhaps most obvious when we reflect on the Season of Advent, which begins two weeks from today. Our society has already begun its celebration of Christmas. By contrast, inasmuch as we observe Advent, we will find ourselves in a penitential time of waiting. The airwaves and malls will resound with “Joy to the world, the Lord is come,” while we will be singing “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” and praying, “Let the dayspring from on high visit those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide their feet into the way of peace.”

Advent will be for us a counter-cultural activity, and that is the way it should be. As followers of Jesus, we follow the beat of a different drummer. We find ourselves in the world, certainly, but at the same time we are not of the world. If there is no difference between the Christian community and the world, then we will have nothing to say to our culture. To say something to the world requires a distance from it. If there is no distance between our faith community and the world, we will simply reflect all that surrounds us.

Our celebration of Thanksgiving poses a slightly different task. The observance of Thanksgiving is not part of the liturgical year. It is an American holiday. In the church, we can observe it as such and not give it much thought, but will our reflection on Thanksgiving have any kind of critical edge for us? I trust it will.

Perhaps Reinhold Niebuhr can help us. Eighty years ago, when he was the pastor of Detroit’s Bethel Evangelical Church, he had this to say about the celebration of Thanksgiving:

I wonder if it is really possible to have an honest Thanksgiving celebration in an industrial civilization. Harvest festivals were natural enough in peasant communities. The agrarian feels himself depend upon nature's beneficence and anxious about nature's caprices. When the autumnal festival is finally safe in the barns there arise, with the sigh of relief, natural emotions of gratitude that must express themselves religiously, since the bounty is actually created by the mysterious forces of nature which man may guide but never quite control.

All that is different in an industrial civilization in which so much wealth is piled up by the ingenuity of the machine, and, at least seemingly, by the diligence of man. Thanksgiving becomes increasingly the business of congratulating the Almighty upon his most excellent co-workers, ourselves. I have had that feeling about the Thanksgiving proclamations of our Presidents for some years. An individual living in an industrial community might still celebrate a Thanksgiving day uncorrupted by pride, because he does benefit from processes and forces which he does not create or even guide. But a national Thanksgiving, particularly if it is meant to express gratitude for material bounty, becomes increasingly a pharisaic rite.

The union Thanksgiving service we attended this morning was full of the kind of self-righteous bunk which made it quite impossible for me to worship. There was indeed a faint odor of contrition in one of the prayers and in an aside of the sermon, but it did not spring from the heart. The Lord who was worshiped was not the Lord of hosts, but the spirit of Uncle Sam, given a cosmic eminence for the moment which the dear old gentleman does not deserve.

It is a bad thing when religion is used as a vehicle of pride. It would be better to strut unashamedly down the boardwalk of nations than go through the business of bowing humbly before God while we say, "We thank thee Lord that we are not as other men."<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 118–119.

I believe that Niebuhr was on to something when he wrote those words. Those who acknowledge their dependence upon God and the forces of nature feel a profound gratitude when there is a harvest. However, the more distant we are from that sense of dependency, the more difficult it is for us to be genuinely grateful. Like the people of Israel who quickly forgot that they were once fed manna in the wilderness once they were safely settled in the land, we too can begin to think that it is by our own hand that we have gotten these things. Thanksgiving then becomes a time to congratulate ourselves for all that we have accomplished.

Gratitude does not easily arise in the hearts of those who are self-sufficient. It is even more difficult for nations to be grateful, especially nations that pride themselves on their power and influence in the world. A nation like the United States of America can fall into the sin of pride even more so than human beings. After sharing Reinhold Niebuhr's reflection on Thanksgiving with a group of clergy last week, a friend said to me, "You ought to take a look at Abraham Lincoln's Thanksgiving Proclamation to see how far our nation has departed from the original spirit behind the holiday." And so I "googled" Abraham Lincoln's Thanksgiving proclamation. Abraham Lincoln issued his proclamation during the civil war. By October 1863, the Union forces had made significant advances into Confederate strongholds. Lincoln could have taken the road of self-congratulatory pride. But he did not. This is what he said, in part:

. . . I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility and Union.

It has been a very long time since we have heard a national Thanksgiving proclamation like that. Just try to imagine a proclamation owning up to this nation's perverseness and disobedience. I suspect that Abraham Lincoln knew full well the danger of prosperity and power. He knew that these could easily crowd out genuine gratitude. He did not want the United States to forget the grace of dependency, the need to hold fast to a dependency upon the mercy and goodness of God.

As a nation, in the days following 9/11, we caught a glimpse of the grace of dependency when peoples throughout the world expressed their concern for us. Yesterday, at the Church Fair, Abe Weinstein (he played jazz with John Norris) came up to me and told me about his experience in Nova Scotia following 9/11. He was on an airplane that was diverted to the Halifax airport. A complete stranger, a resident of Halifax, put him up for three days in his home until he was able to board a flight for home. Abe said that he had never in his life experienced such concern for him and such hospitality. It was an incident that changed his life. He discovered the grace of dependency.

Alas, the United States has forgotten how others cared for us back then, and has returned to its old ways. It has once more fostered the rhetoric of independence rather than interdependency. The time will come, however, when we will have to acknowledge the truth of interdependency. For we cannot go on the way we are, acting in the world as if we do not need others.

Independence, whether personal, or national, is an illusion. As human beings, we would not last very long if it were not for others, if it were not for the blessings of the creation, if it were not for the grace of God. Nor can a nation exist apart from other nations and peoples. We live in an interdependent world. That is an essential truth of our lives.

So our celebration of Thanksgiving, just as our observance of Advent, can indeed have a counter-cultural ring to it. In a world that celebrates self-sufficiency and individualism and the value of being independent, we dare to acknowledge the grace of dependency and the truth of interdependency. This is what makes genuine gratitude possible. Independent people do not need to thank anyone for anything. Only people who acknowledge the grace of dependency may embody the spirit of genuine gratitude. May that gratitude dwell in our hearts always. Amen.