



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

2 Poland Manor
Poland, Ohio 44514
330-757-1547

November 22, 2015

A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

With Thanksgiving

Psalm 100

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

Worship the Lord with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.

Know that the Lord is God.

It is he that made us, and we are his;*
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the Lord is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

A large family sat around the breakfast table one morning. The father returned thanks, blessing God for the food. Immediately after, however, he began to grumble and whine about:

- hard times,
- the poor quality of the food he was forced to eat,
- the eggs were cold,
- the muffin was dry and stale,
- and the coffee was too weak.

His little daughter interrupted him, “Dad, do you suppose God heard what you said a little while ago when you were giving thanks?”

“Certainly,” the father replied.

“And did he hear what you said about the eggs, the muffins, and the coffee?”

“Of course,” replied the father, “God hears everything.”

Then his daughter asked, “Dad, which did God believe?”

In our current age, when we have raised whining, complaining, and critiquing to an art form, a genuine spirit of Thanksgiving is counter-cultural. It requires moral courage and a spirit that is not of this world: certainly not common to our experience. I believe it is also an act of defiance: defiance in the face of a culture that focuses on the self and eschews altruism; defiance in the face of popular piety that expects God to provide on our terms.

The first settlers in America landed in December of 1620 in Massachusetts. They understood their perilous journey in terms of the exodus from Egypt. They were on “an errand in the wilderness.” That wilderness was

harsh. One month after landing, 10 of the 17 fathers and husbands who were on the ship, (the Mayflower), died. Within 3 months of landing, only four of the mothers and wives were alive out of the first 17 couples. By springtime almost half of the pilgrims were dead.

Today we would hold hearings and inquests to figure out who to blame. We would blame it all on poor planning, landing in a strange world in the middle of winter, without provisions and without shelter. We would blame the loss on the leadership and would demand their heads. Yet in 1621, 11 months later, the few who were left celebrated and gave thanks to God.

Giving thanks is an act of defiance.

In Europe, just 26 years later, there was a Lutheran pastor named Martin Rinckart. He lived in Eilenberg, Saxony during the siege of the Thirty Years War. Eilenberg was a walled city, besieged by Swedes. 800 homes were burned and the people within the city walls suffered from plague and starvation. The clergy in that community were burying 12 people a day. Soon the clergy themselves started to die and Rinckart was the only pastor left. He was conducting 40-50 funerals a day! In the coming year he would bury 4,480 people including, (in May of that year), his own wife. In 1648, when the conflict ended, Rinckart sat down and penned these words in a prayer poem for his children;

Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices,

Who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices;

Who from our mothers' arms has blessed us on our way

With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

40-50 funerals a day!!!!

Giving thanks is an act of defiance.

- It is the defiance of the human spirit in the face of oppression, war, the elements, and the principalities and powers that hurt, threaten, and destroy.
- It is the defiance of the human spirit in the face of the merchants of death who are empowered by ungrateful voices demanding more.
- It is the defiance of the human spirit that hopes against hope; clinging to the sanctity of life, and affirming the reality that life and creation are good.
- It is the defiance of the human spirit that, even when we are lost in the wilderness of despair, we can raise our voices in thanksgiving for the manna and quail in the morning and the water that springs from the rocks in our cultural wasteland.

Thanksgiving requires a different perspective. It requires seeing and understanding life differently. It requires believing, in our heart of hearts, that we, too, are pilgrims, on an errand in the wilderness. This wilderness is the context of life. But our eyes are firmly fixed on the Promised Land. We are going somewhere. This gives us the strength, the moral courage, indeed the defiant and grateful spirit that journeys on.

This spirit of gratitude is at the core of Christian faith. It is the source of strength and will, not merely to endure, but to prevail.

The great 20th century Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, remarked that the preacher should have the Bible in one hand, and the newspaper in the other. It is good advice, because the newspaper is our context. It tells the story of the wilderness in which we wander. But we know another story. The Bible, with the Pentateuch, History, Poetry, Psalms, Prophets, the teachings Jesus, and the Letters of Paul declare an alternative and hopeful reality. The Biblical story is infused with the hope from the covenants of promise made with Abraham, Moses, and David. It is the hope of the resurrection of Jesus and the New Covenant of love. This hope is, for the human spirit, manna in the wilderness: indeed, bread from heaven.

The newspaper tells the story of the wilderness and the current human condition. But the stories of the bible are filled the defiant affirmations of promise, hope, and thanksgiving that God's people proclaim as they journey through the wilderness.

The preacher, and indeed the believer, should hold the newspaper in one hand, and the bible in the other.

In the newspaper we read about the failures of nations, their inability to provide for their people and the partisan divisions that keeps them stuck. But in the Bible we have the story of the kingdom of God and the prophetic vision of justice for all peoples, indeed for widows, orphans, the exile and the alien... "the least of these".

And we give thanks!

In the newspaper we read about the attacks in Paris, the threats of terrorism, the wars and rumors of wars. But in the bible we read the words of the prophet Isaiah, "They will beat their **swords** into **plowshares** and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore."

And we give thanks.

In the newspaper we read about hunger and starvation throughout the world, including sisters and brothers in our own neighborhoods. But in the Bible we read about God's abundance in the wilderness: manna and quails from heaven; water from the rocks. This is echoed for the Christian community in the story of the feeding of the 5000. In the Bible we read that the hungry will be fed.

And we give thanks.

In the newspaper, we read about the depletion of resources, the loss of clean water, and the potential for ecological disaster. But in the bible we read about God's intention for humanity, first a garden, fulfilling every human need, and then a land, flowing with milk and honey. The words of the Deuteronomy capture God's intention for humanity in almost poetic language:

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you.

We hear those words, and we give thanks.

In the newspaper we read that this Friday is something called "Black Friday": a day of orgiastic consumption. But in the Bible we read that God has given us the gift of Sabbath. A day, not only of rest, but a day to fully

participate in God's re-creation; a day that reminds us, each and all, that we are no longer slaves in Egypt. No longer does the bondsman own our time and our future. We are given the Sabbath as a reminder that we are free from slavery in all its insidious forms. Sabbath: a day belonging to God and not to the bondsman, whether it be the taskmaster in Egypt or our modern addiction to work and travail.

And we give thanks.

We should not be unrealistic. We live in the world of the newspaper and all the reality that it declares. But we are passing through. We are pilgrims, seeking the kingdom which is yet to come.

- The art of life in this world is to journey toward that land, that kingdom, that hope that is promised by our God.
- The art of life is to cling tenaciously and defiantly to the hope we have in the covenants our God has given...
- The art of life, as we wander through the wilderness described in the newspapers, is to look for, discover, and share the manna from heaven that God has placed in our paths.

We too, are pilgrims, with our backs to Egypt, struggling to survive in the wilderness. Nevertheless, we are on our way rejoicing, defiantly giving thanks to God. The act of thanksgiving is defiant. In our current age, it is definitely counter-cultural. It requires moral to offer thanks. It requires a spirit that is not of this world, and certainly not common in our experience.

May that spirit of gratitude permeate your thanksgiving experience, and indeed your life. Amen.