

## Celebrating God's Gifts, Committing Ourselves to God's Work

As children grow up at some point they start to ask for stories about what they were like during their early days and years, milestones like how old they were when they first walked, and do we remember what their first word was? Or, in our case, what their first sentence was, since apparently their first words weren't remarkable enough for us to write down in their baby books. But what if we turn that question around and ask our kids if they remember the first things we said to them? Our first words and sentences? Chances are good, "What do you say?" would be one of them.

Kids don't come out being appreciative. That's one of the first things we have to teach them. If someone gives them a cookie, they should say 'thank you.' If grandma sends a cool toy, they need to recognize that someone has given them something special, and be grateful. If "mine" is one of their very first words, if not life-philosophies, we try to make "thank you" follow along not far behind.

Now, Presbyterians are not usually given to talking about backsliding, but I think we've become backsliders (all people, not just Presbyterians). "Mine" is more of a predominant thought in our minds than "thanks". I've earned this. I deserve this, and it is mine. Mine, mine, mine. So, I'd like to make a proposal: I'd like to suggest that we reclaim the original purpose of Thanksgiving. Not, of course, to celebrate surviving the long hard winter with the help of our native friends, but to reclaim the spiritual discipline of gratitude, and not just one day a year, but year round. I'd like to see us spend a few minutes every day cataloguing, as it were, all that we have been provided (not earned), and giving thanks for it. And I don't just mean our material goods, but all of the things mentioned in the psalm: forgiveness, compassion, a listening ear...

Now that's a good start, but even that's not enough. Gratitude simply for the sake of gratitude doesn't go far enough. We can't just say "thanks" this morning and go home. Do you remember the terms of the covenant God made with Abraham? Abraham would be blessed, but blessed so that he could be a blessing to the rest of the world. Do you remember the end of the parable in Luke 12 where the master goes off and leaves his servants to look after things and be ready and alert for his return? Jesus said that to whom much is given, much will be expected, demanded, even. Every one of us, even the most humble, has been given so much by God. But it's not just ours to keep, it's ours to share and hand on. It is ours, but like the \$5 I gave to the kids last week, it is ours to do God's work with.

And let me be clear. When I say, "do God's work," I don't just mean supporting the church. That would be manipulative for us to intentionally schedule stewardship dedication at Thanksgiving as if to say, look at all you have, now pony up. Maintaining God's house is important. I think we have covered that in recent weeks. It has to be a priority; we can't neglect either our physical plant or our program costs. But, if we stop there and say we have done enough, that that is all God asks of us, we don't really know God very well, do we?

The mission of the church isn't to be an inwardly focused, self-contained oasis in the midst of the harsh elements of the world around us. Our mission is to nurture your faith and equip you for ministry, and most of that ministry happens out there. Think back to the scripture we just read,

where Jesus stood in the synagogue and announced that the words of the prophets had been fulfilled. It wasn't, I have come to host potlucks and church softball leagues and invite you all to be members of this great little society. He said that he had come to bring good news to the poor and to set free anyone who was oppressed by disease or loneliness or hunger, or guess what, by us, and our own thirst for power and money. Because "mine" comes to our lips far more easily than "thank you".

It may seem like we are juggling a lot today – Thanksgiving, stewardship dedication, Alternative Gift Fair – but it's all part of the same conversation around what it means to follow Jesus, to be his disciple. What has he called us to do, and how has he equipped us to do it?

What we do here, this is only a beginning place. We come here to be fed and to support and encourage each other. This is like Galilee, the place of nurture and discipling and worship. But we can't stay here forever. Out there is Jerusalem, the place where we give our selves to the world, and the place we must go if we are going to follow Jesus. We need both, and both need us.

You all received pledge cards in the mail in the past few weeks, and you have been asked not only to give, but to increase your giving. If each of us gave even five or ten dollars more a week, not only would there be no more deficit, but we could do more in the way of ministry. And in just a minute you are going to hear from representatives of each of the ministry organizations at the Alternative Gift Fair, and the needs they have. and you may be tempted to think to yourself, it's too much. I have just so much money, and I can't do it all. Let me finish by saying two things. One, you are right, you can't do it all. No one is asking you to. God isn't asking you to. And two, remember that God's resources are never scarce. God always gives us, not just enough to do the work we've been given, but an abundance. Plenty.

We have been blessed to be a blessing. Thanks be to God for all that we have, but also for the work he has entrusted us with. May we be found faithful at the Master's return.