

Thanksgiving is one of our oldest American holidays. In 1789, George Washington proclaimed the first official American Thanksgiving, writing, "I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th day of November next to be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be—That we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks—for his kind care and protection of the People of this Country ..."

We have been celebrating Thanksgiving as an annual holiday ever since.

You can imagine my surprise, then, as I went into several stores a day or two after Halloween looking for Thanksgiving decorations and supplies to use at Our Community Cup Coffeehouse and found – nothing. There were a few paper plates with autumn leaves on them, some Halloween stuff on deep discount, and Christmas – Christmas decorations were everywhere. It was as if Thanksgiving didn't even exist.

I do wonder whether this isn't part of our national predicament just now. Thanksgiving has disappeared, aside from a big family meal for those of us fortunate enough to have big families, and as a shopping day for Christmas. That original sense of communal thanksgiving, that awareness that we all are indebted to the God who is mentioned in Washington's Thanksgiving proclamation, the God who graciously blesses us day by day and celebrating it together, seems to have disappeared. Instead, there is a loss of awareness of what we have in common and what we have to celebrate together. We just sit in our corners and snipe at one another.

I'm as guilty of this as anyone. If you had suggested to me that I have a gratitude problem, I would have thought you were crazy. If you listen to my prayers, you'll notice I almost always start with thanks, no matter what the circumstances. That's not just a matter of form. I truly believe all we have is a gift from God, and I am daily filled with wonder and gratitude at all we have been given, from the grace that is ours through Jesus Christ to marvelous structure of a spider's web to the joy of human relationships to the blessing of a warm place to live on a cold and damp November day. I try my best to live my

life out of this sense of gratitude. Much of what I do for others is a grateful response to the gifts I have been given, as I try to say thanks for the abundance I have received. For me, gratitude is a primary spiritual gift and spiritual discipline.

I realize this is not the case for everyone. Some folks have to struggle to feel grateful. They come out of a place of never-enough and never-good-enough and it's hard to receive what is given as a gift that is given rather than earned, a gift for which you simply say "thanks".

Where I run into trouble these days, though, is in the area of larger corporate thanks, thanks for the big things that we all share, the kind of thanks President Washington expressed in his Thanksgiving proclamation. I look at the world and I listen to the news and I am often anxious, afraid and angry. I worry about the future of our nation, the future of the church, the future of our planet. I feel divided from those who hold different political views from mine to the extent that the other day, when I realized that the car I was about to park next to had bumper stickers I could not agree with, I almost moved to a different space. In a world this messed up, with people we can't agree with, how can we find a way to give thanks together?

In her book *Gratitude*, Diana Butler Bass says that at the most basic level gratitude involves two aspects of experience: emotions (feelings in response to gifts) and ethics (actions in response to gifts) that function in two areas of our lives – the "me" of individual life and the "we" of community. In our individualistic society, we are way better at the "me" part of gratitude, so, like me, people do things like keeping gratitude journals and are grateful for things in their own personal lives, but we aren't as good at the "we" end of things, celebrating and giving thanks for the larger things we share with one another.

I believe that is because we have lost track of our shared, common story. We hear an ancient version of that common story in our reading from Deuteronomy this morning: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor...When the Egyptians treated us harshly,...we cried to the Lord; the Lord hear our

prayers and brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm... and brought us into this place, a land flowing with milk and honey." Even though the person making the offering and speaking this prayer was far removed from that distant ancestor, the story was so real and immediate, it was as if it happened to him, and so he offered thanks to God. That shared story bound him together with all the other Israelites and together they gave thanks. That shared story brought them together in spite of differences and reminded them of history and values they had as common ground, a place to stand on together as they tried to figure out how to go forward.

We have some of those stories too. One of the most recent stories for us as Americans is remembering how on the days immediately following 9/11 we came together in our grief, reaching out to one another across lines of race and ethnicity, determined that hate would not win. For us as Christians, no matter whether we are liberal or conservative, our common story is that God so loved the world that he sent his only son Jesus Christ that the world through him might be saved. It's when we create opportunities to tell and celebrate those stories together that we are moved to corporate thanks and a recognition that we're all in this together.

That happens in small ways when we look at the leaves on our Thanksgiving tree. Each of those leaves represents the thanks-giving of one person, a single not-that-strong statement. But when they are all together on the tree, when they are all spoken in our prayers later this morning, then they become a community offering of thanks, made louder and stronger because we do it together. And as we give thanks together, we are connected to one another.

Another place where this happens for me each year is in our Community Thanksgiving Service where people from various churches across Springfield gather to give thanks. It is a blessing to slide down the pew with my fellow clergy as we lead worship together, even more of a blessing when I look out

over the congregation and see faces from across the community that I've gotten to recognize and know over the years as we as a community give thanks together.

Thanks-giving isn't just an emotion, though, a warm feeling. It also is an action. One of the places where we see that gratitude in action is in our community-wide Souperbowl of Caring where for twelve years now people from across the faith spectrum or from no faith at all work together on two weekends to collect food for hungry neighbors in a communal act of thanksgiving and compassion. In working together for the common good, we are connected in new ways to one another and to our community. We create a culture of gratitude.

Diana Butler Bass says gratitude is not just a gift. It is a choice. We can choose to be grateful in our individual lives or we can choose to complain and be miserable. We can choose to be grateful together in our community or we can choose to be angry and go our separate ways. She suggests that it is when we choose to be grateful that we begin to change the world. Gratitude amplifies goodness, rescues us from negative emotions and connects us to others in meaningful ways. The whole last chapter of the book talks about how the practice of gratitude can turn the negative systems of the world inside out and bring hope and healing to our world.

This morning, we offer our thanks to God in the form of our harvest offering of food and our stewardship commitments for the year ahead as well as through our prayers. Let's not let the gratitude stop there. This Thanksgiving, let's choose thanks. Let's actually stop and give thanks for what we've been given instead of just heading straight for the turkey. Let's take opportunities to join with our community to give thanks as well. And through our thanks, may God's Spirit create a new spirit among us, a spirit of gratitude not only to God, but toward one another as well.

