

Giving Thanks in All Circumstances
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington
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Text:

Luke 22: 14-20

When the hour came, Jesus took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, 'Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.' Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.'"

Prayer

Sermon

Here's the pattern, illustrated over and over again in the gospels:

People are hungry.

Jesus witnesses their hunger.

Jesus gives thanks.

And everyone eats,

Because there is enough.

Maybe the reason Jesus gives thanks is because there is enough for everyone to eat.

Or maybe the reason there's enough is that Jesus gives thanks.

John's gospel says they doesn't just remember the moment when so many are fed, it recalls the place, and what Jesus does there:

"They came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks." (John 6:23)

They had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks.

In each of the synoptic Gospel passages that narrate the Last Supper, the same pattern plays out:

In spite of the strain of the circumstance,
In spite of being on the eve of his death,
In spite of knowing denial and betrayal are coming,
Jesus gives thanks. And then he shares food with his followers.

There's a profound spiritual lesson here, for us, a people enduring a time of great strain.

If Jesus could give thanks on that night,
So we can give thanks today.
Even, yes even in the midst of a spiking pandemic, on the eve of a contentious election,
and in ongoing systemic racism and economic inequality.

If Jesus could see something to be grateful for, on the eve of his death,
So we can practice gratitude.
And that practice can help us get through all of it.

Kent Millard says it this way:

" Jesus frequently gave thanks and praise to God. Jesus lived his life with an attitude of gratitude toward God in all the different circumstances of his life, and called his followers to give constant thanks and praise to God as well. When we follow Jesus along the gratitude path of life, we discover that we too live closer to God and experience God's abundance in our lives."¹

Paul was a fan of gratitude:

¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God (1 Thessalonians 5: 16-18)

¹ The Gratitude Path, page x.

But let's be clear, neither Jesus nor Paul - nor I - would say, give thanks *for* all circumstances. The idea is not to celebrate or glorify pain, but rather to see thanksgiving as something we can do in spite and in the midst of all circumstances. And in fact I think it isn't just an obligation, to give thanks in all circumstances. It's a blessing to us to pause in thanksgiving and gratitude. It changes our perspective and helps us to find hope.

I told folks in Bible Study that I'm packing a metaphorical suitcase. Don't worry, it's metaphorical only. I'm packing a suitcase of memories of October, things that I'm thankful for in this season, to remind me to be thankful as the days grow shorter and colder, and there's snow on the ground, as case counts increase and who knows what happens after the election and life seems unsteady. I'm packing memories of the toddlers who spent hours picking out pumpkins; seeing some of you at the Pumpkin unloading and others at the vespers and others on your porches. I'm packing the memories of hiking with my family and sitting in the warm sun while painting and eating pizza on the deck. These are things I will give thanks for all winter.

What's in your Thanksgiving suitcase?

That same author says, "what we count, we increase...when people focus their attention on the blessings in their lives - their lives *how they are*, they always seem to have more blessings to share."² When people focus attention on the blessings in our lives as they are now, when people give thanks in all circumstances, in spite of hardship, we discover more and more to give thanks for.

"When we open our hands and give [thanks and give] generously to God, then we are in the open-handed position to receive blessings from God. Conversely, if we live with our fists tightly closed keeping our resources only for ourselves, we close ourselves off from receiving the blessings God wants to put in our hands."³

This stewardship season I've asked you to consider a few invitations. None of them are particular to money, but but our pledges are one way to accept these invitations.

First, the invitation to love - love that is other-centered, self-giving, neighborly, agape love. Because folks sure do need that right now.

Second, the invitation to envision and live into a future-story of active hope, and to write that story with Pilgrim and yourselves as key actors in it.

² Ibid, Page 8

³ Ibid, Page 28

Here's the third invitation: give thanks in all circumstances.

If Jesus could give thanks the very night he was arrested, so can we give thanks, even in the midst of all the uncertainty, injustice, and tragedy that surrounds us. Giving thanks builds up in us the spiritual and emotional strength for agape love, and for writing a future story of active hope.

Amen.