

Pastor's Message – 11/19/2023
Deuteronomy 8:7-18

It is cute and amusing to see the comments from the children about Thanksgiving. It is heartwarming to read what they are thankful for: their pets, their homes, and families and even for the church and for God. Kids can steer us in the right direction for gratitude at Thanksgiving time.

However, there are times when we let kids steer us in the wrong direction and when we don't teach them properly. You have probably seen the cute newspaper articles where they list kid's recipes for preparing the Thanksgiving turkey. I went on the internet and pulled just a few.

First get out the turkey. Next heat the turkey on high. Then pull the turkey out and use oven mitts. Pour buttermilk on the turkey when it's in a pan. Finally go eat it.

This is my idea of the perfect turkey. First buy the turkey. Then wash the turkey. Dry the turkey. Shove the turkey. Cook the turkey. Put it on 340 and there's a perfect turkey.

First cut off the turkey's head. Then pluck the feathers off. Stuff it. Cook it at 1,000,000 degrees. Then take it out. Then get the biggest knife you have. Finally cut it into slices. First one to eat it without cooling gets cranberry sauce.

As Americans we have inherited a beautiful land, a promised land. As we travel around our country in the summertime or, really, any time of the year, we can realize just what a grand inheritance we have received.

We have also been a destructive people. We have not taken care of this rich and gorgeous land. We constantly engage in a battle to preserve the environment. We can be grateful for the men and women through the years who have had the vision to create and preserve our national park system that protects our country's wilderness areas from development.

We sometimes forget to be thankful and sometimes forget what to be thankful for. Thanksgiving is not a religious holiday. It is a national holiday. It is pretty much a law that we give thanks to God on this day, and Presidents have proclaimed it as such. But we are sometimes an ungrateful people. The French Catholic philosopher, Jacques Maritain once wrote: Americans seem to be in their own land as pilgrims, prodded by a dream. They are always on the move -- available for new tasks, prepared for the possible loss of what they have. They are not settled, installed..."

I remember a while ago, the Liberty Mutual Insurance Company put out an interesting series of commercials. The commercial showed someone doing something kind for another person -- helping someone with their groceries, grabbing a child's balloon before it floated away. Each shot of the act of kindness showed a third person as witness to the act -- and the next segment of the commercial showed the observer doing something kind - passing it on. Each commercial showed a chain of three or four kind deeds "paid forward." The commercials are especially interesting because they go beyond the idea of

paying forward something good done to you; instead, they celebrate the good deeds that *others* do and that we can use as an example in our own lives. These are noble and notable sentiments, but it doesn't take a Christian to do good. Believers are called to give, and give generously, but to give from grateful hearts to the One who has given to us and given unconditionally. Believers are called to see the gifts of God among us.

It reminds me of a story that I heard not long ago, and I have to preface this by saying that I have long had turtles as pets and the story is a sad one. It seems there were two women driving along the road and up ahead was a couple of cars and a group of people who were stopped on the shoulder. And the woman who was driving did what any responsible person would do. She slowed down and moved over, away from the shoulder all the while keeping an eye on the people to pass by safely. Unfortunately, while watching the people, she failed to see the turtle in the road that they were trying to help across. You can imagine what happened.

The speeches and exhortations in our Bible passage from Deuteronomy today were given at the end of the Israelites' 40 years of wandering in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 1:3). A generation had passed since Israel had left Egypt; those present had only known God's provision. They would soon cross over the Jordan and enter a land of promise, filled with blessings and abundance. Were they prepared to see God's hand at work and to continue to give thanks amidst everyday life when the manna stopped falling from the sky?

Remember that God brought you out of slavery and into an abundant land. (vs. 11)

Do not forget the Lord by failing to keep the commandments and statutes and ordinances. (vs. 11)

Do not become proud at that time and forget the LORD your God, who rescued you from slavery in the land of Egypt. (v. 14)

In one sense our nation is a promised land, but in another sense, it is a "not yet" promised land. Fortunately, in every generation we have had special people call our attention to the biblical admonition: "Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God..." This coming Thursday will be a day of feasting and, for some, will be a day of gluttony: a day on which gratitude to God may be absent, a day filled with other priorities. Thursday will be a day clouded with football and turkey and parades and parties and whatnot.

At least one thing will be common about all those football games. Each football game will begin with the national anthem. Or they think they do. Most people know the words to the first verse of the Star-Spangled Banner. They think that's the National Anthem, but they don't know that it has four verses. The fourth verse is a hymn of thanks and praise and a reminder of where the victory, the peace, indeed all gifts come from.

Francis Scott Key's hymn included a motto later used on U.S. money starting in 1865 and made the legal motto of the country in 1956. His four-verse long poem became the National Anthem in 1931.

Even in our National Anthem we are asking, can't we pray together on this one thing: that we need to be grateful and give thanks and praise to God, no matter what? Because when we trust in him, we know gratitude. When we focus on the giver and focus on by whom we are blest, we become givers and realize we are blest. Even in our National Anthem we are asking, can't we pray together on this one thing: that we need to be grateful and give thanks and praise to God, no matter what? Because when we trust in him, we know gratitude.

Maybe we should sing the fourth verse more often than we sing the first.

Oh! thus be it ever, when freemen shall stand
 Between their loved home and the war's desolation!
 Blest with victory and peace, may the heav'n rescued land
 Praise the Power that hath made and preserved us a nation.
 Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just,
 And this be our motto: "In God is our trust."
 And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave
 O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!

The song, "All Good Gifts" from Godspell, has long touched me and I've tried to sing it in the past, but it's really too high for me, so I'd like to conclude this Message by having us listen to and watch the Woodlands United Methodist Church Choir sing it much better than I ever could and be grateful for all the gifts around us and from whence they come.