

Dave Johnson

Sermon: “Thanksgiving in the Midst of Suffering”

November 24, 2011

I’m so glad to have the privilege of worshipping with you all on this beautiful Thanksgiving morning ☺.

Each year my family and I watch *A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving*, the iconic cartoon special that was released in the early 70’s. It opens with the famous scene of Lucy holding the football for Charlie Brown to kick. Charlie Brown is apprehensive because each time in the past he has gone to kick the ball while Lucy was holding it she has pulled it away at the last second so that he violently kicks the air only to land on his back. Lucy assures him that this will not happen this time, and so Charlie Brown winds up, sprints to the ball to kick it with all his might, and of course you know what happens, at the last possible second Lucy pulls the ball away and once again Charlie Brown lands on his back.

Sometimes Thanksgiving can be that way for people. Sometimes either the presence or absence of certain people at the dining room table can exacerbate this. We hope it will be different this year. Surely they won’t pull the ball away yet again... but it often happens. Some people try to take the edge off of this with a little help from their friends Jack Daniels or Sam Adams or Johnny Walker, not that I would know anything about that... ☺.

Today I am going to preach briefly about Thanksgiving in the midst of suffering. This is not a pessimistic sermon, but it is fascinating to see in history and scripture the phenomenon of thanksgiving in the midst of suffering. I am going to share several images of thanksgiving in the midst of suffering.

As you may know the official Thanksgiving holiday in the United States was established by Abraham Lincoln in 1863, during the midst of the greatest season of suffering ever endured on our soil. Just months after the battle of Gettysburg, and days after his classic Gettysburg Address Lincoln wrote the following about the need for a national day of Thanksgiving:

“The year that is drawing towards its close, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come others have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature, that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever watchful providence of Almighty God. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy... I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States... to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next,

as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens.”

Lincoln established a national day of Thanksgiving in the midst of the nation’s most tragic suffering as she tore herself apart in civil war. And Lincoln of course was no stranger to personal suffering as two of the four sons borne by his wife Mary Todd died in childhood, one, Willie, while Lincoln was president; and yet Lincoln was an advocate of thanksgiving in the midst of suffering.

The Apostle Paul, of course, was no stranger to suffering, and yet, like Lincoln, in the midst of that suffering Paul overflowed with thanksgiving. One of the letters he wrote while suffering in prison was his Letter to the Colossians, from which Catherine read a few minutes ago. Did you catch Paul’s emphasis on thanksgiving in this passage?

“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body,” Paul wrote, “And *be thankful*... And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, *giving thanks* to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:15-17).

Paul, one of the ultimate “Type A” personalities in the history of the church, was stuck in prison, unable to travel throughout the Roman Empire preaching the Gospel and planting churches. And yet one of the main themes of his Letter to the Colossians, written while stuck in prison, was thanksgiving in the midst of suffering. “Be thankful... giving thanks” in the midst of everything, even suffering.

I’ll share an example from my own life, something I think about every year on Thanksgiving. About ten years ago while I was serving as a youth minister in South Carolina, one of the students at our church, a seventeen-year old named Devin, tragically was diagnosed with cancer. He fought valiantly and for awhile it appeared to be in remission, but as often happens the cancer came back with a vengeance and was too much for him to overcome. I spent many hours with him during his final weeks. We talked, watched movies, told funny stories, and sometimes just sat in silence. I had the solemn privilege of preaching at his funeral. After the funeral his mom came up to me, smiled, and told me she had something for me from Devin. She handed me an envelope. “Devin asked me to give this to you after his death,” she said. Later while alone in my office I opened it. Do you know what was in the envelope? A thank-you note, written by Devin in shaky black script because toward the end of his life he could not keep his hands from shaking, a beautiful note of thanks for all the time we had spent together. I’ve never forgotten that, a seventeen year-old in the midst of terminal suffering was writing thank-you notes... thanksgiving in the midst of suffering.

One more image of thanksgiving in the midst of suffering, the greatest example in history of

thanksgiving in the midst of suffering.

On the night before Jesus' passion and death He established the sacrament of Holy Communion at the Last Supper. Jesus, wracked with unspeakable stress and anxiety, only hours before what he knew would be the most brutal suffering imaginable, established Holy Communion for you and me. Listen to where thanksgiving appears in Matthew's account of this:

“While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, and after *giving thanks* he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom’” (Matthew 26:26-29).

Jesus instituted Holy Communion at the Last Supper, He gave thanks; and the next day suffered on the cross for the sins of the whole world, all of it.

When Jesus died on the cross he atoned for every sinful thought word and deed, he atoned for all the suffering people have caused one another, he atoned for all the suffering people have caused themselves, he atoned for all the times someone has pulled the ball away from you, or you from them. Jesus was cast on his back and died to atone for all of it.

And what is to be our response to all this? Thanksgiving.

There is nothing we can do to add or supplement one iota Jesus' finished work of forgiveness on the cross. The only sacrifice we are to give is a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.

One of my heroes is Thomas Cranmer, the leader of the English Reformation and architect of *The Book of Common Prayer*. In 1550 he wrote a book about Holy Communion entitled, *Defense of the True and Catholic Doctrine of the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ*, in which he states:

“One kind of sacrifice there is, which is called a propitiatory or merciful sacrifice, that is to say, such a sacrifice that pacifieth God’s wrath and indignation, and obtaineth mercy and forgiveness for all our sins... For by (Jesus’) one oblation he satisfied his Father for all men’s sins, and reconciled mankind unto his grace and favor... Another kind of sacrifice there is, which doth not reconcile us to God, but is made of them that be reconciled by Christ, to testify our duties unto God, and to show ourselves thankful unto him; and therefore they be called sacrifices of laud, praise, and thanksgiving. The first kind of sacrifice Christ offered to God for us; the second kind we ourselves offer to God by Christ.”

And Thomas Cranmer was of course no stranger to suffering as he was pulled from the pulpit at St. Mary's Church in Oxford on March 21, 1556, dragged to a stake to which he was chained, and burned to death.

The heart of Holy Communion is thanksgiving. In fact, as you may know, the word Eucharist comes from the Greek verb *eucharizo*, which means "to give thanks." At Holy Communion we simply give thanks to God in response to the love and grace given us in Jesus Christ.

So what about you on this Thanksgiving morning? I suspect that none of you are a stranger to suffering, and that some of you may be in the midst of suffering at this moment—physical or emotional or financial or relational, or otherwise.

The good news of the gospel is that our Savior is no stranger to suffering either. Jesus cares, cares deeply about every ounce of suffering in our lives. He cared so much for us that he died for us.

And of course, the good news of the gospel is that suffering will not have the final word in your life. Whatever form of suffering you have, are, or will experience, it will not have the final word.

Jesus, the Suffering Servant, has the final word, "I am the resurrection and the life." And in heaven there will be absolutely no more suffering, none. And there we'll join Abraham Lincoln and the Apostle Paul and Devin and Thomas Cranmer and every person you love and miss, all of them, for a Thanksgiving feast that will last forever.

In the meantime, even in the midst of the suffering in our lives, we can receive tangible signs of God's love and grace in the bread and wine of Holy Communion, and simply respond, "Thank you God, thank you God, thank you God."

Happy Thanksgiving!