

INTERFAITH THANKSGIVING SERVICE – NOVEMBER 25, 2009

Fr. Jerry Kopacek

This story goes back to the days of the door-to-door salesmen. One morning the doorbell rang and the lady of the house opened the door to see one of those salesmen. “Good day, ma’am. I was wondering if you need any pins, needles or thread.” When she answered “No, I don’t, thank you”, he persisted “need any pencils or writing paper?” Again she answered: “My good man, I have everything I need.” The salesman didn’t give up. “Ma’am, if you have everything you need, you should thank God. By the way, I just happen to have a small prayer-book with lots of thanksgiving prayers. Just what you need!” You guessed it—she bought the prayer book. You might say that’s what our celebration is here tonight—our own thanksgiving ‘prayer book’!

It is a real joy and privilege for me to be with you this evening. I am in my ninth year of living here in Waterloo as pastor of St. Edward’s (just a short walk south of here on Kimball), and one of the genuine highlights of the year for me is this interfaith service of giving thanks and praise to God along with the other pastors and people of our neighboring congregations and with the rabbi and his synagogue members. We can never overdo it in expressing our gratitude to God, and there is a special joy and grace when we can do so together. I certainly want to wish all of you and all your loved ones a truly blessed Thanksgiving holiday, and I pray for safe travel for all who will be on the road (and that the predicted snowfall will be minimal).

I suspect the meal plans are all set and that the turkey is at least in the thawing process by now. In case you still have some questions about this, here is some advice from youngsters gathered over the years by teachers and others:

--one first-grader gave her recipe for turkey as follows: “Buy it at the store. Pull out the stomach. Put in some stuff, like on TV. Then put it in the oven at 10 degrees for only five minutes.” Talk about going cold turkey....not exactly Martha Stewart here, is it?

--another budding young chef gave these directions: “Go downtown to the store and shoot a turkey. Bring him home and stuff him in the oven. After he cooks an hour, take him out. If he is still alive, shoot him again.” That poor turkey doesn’t have a chance!

Expressing our thanks and gratitude to God, of course, ought to be a daily practice for us as individuals and among our families and acquaintances. And the idea of expressing our thanks to God as a nation has a long and venerable history. All the way back in 1789, George Washington—after his election as our first president—proclaimed a day of thanksgiving to be observed by this new nation. He saw this as right and just since, in his words, “it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will [and] to be grateful for his benefits.” Abraham Lincoln, whose 200th birthday we observe this year, is the president who made the late-November connection with this national Thanksgiving holiday. He made that proclamation in 1863—in the middle of the Civil War, a national tragedy and was brought on by the tragedy of slavery. Even in the midst of war, President Lincoln could name many of the nation’s blessings—for example, the continued growth and development of the United States and a state of peace with other countries. In his words: “No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy.”

Those words of Presidents Washington and Lincoln remain just as true now as they were back in 1789 and 1863. But do we as a nation still believe these words in this 21st century of ours? That is more than a merely rhetorical question, because we are certainly hearing many other voices and ideas. There are some increasingly militant voices who would banish all talk of or reference to God in the public arena, let alone any idea of our public duty to express thanks to God for all we have as a nation. We hear, for example, of those who demand the removal of the two simple words ‘under God’ from the Pledge of Allegiance—

they do not want to hear any notion that we believe ourselves to be ‘one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.’

But there are other factors, perhaps not so blatant and therefore even more insidious, that lead to a declining sense of gratitude to God—nationally, locally, and even personally. One such factor is what we might call the entitlement mentality: “I deserve, I’m entitled to what I have. The world owes me, others owe me, God owes me. It’s mine—so why say ‘thank you’ to anyone?” Now, maybe no one will put it quite so boldly, but that attitude is certainly out there—and then there may be demands for even more. Once a grocery store clerk was arranging oranges in a beautiful display when a young mother came down the aisle with her three-year-old daughter. The clerk gave the little girl a big orange, and she was all smiles. The girl’s mother reminded her: “Now, what do you say to the nice young man?” Instead of the expected ‘thank you’, the little girl held out the orange to him and simply said “Peel it.”

I imagine Mom had a few words for her—but after all, she was only three years old. Much more difficult to understand are those who have so much, yet—far from showing gratitude—demand even more. Consider, for example, some of our professional athletes. Now, anyone who knows me knows that I’m a big sports fan—and the staff and other members of St. Ed’s could probably tell you all my favorite teams without any problem (I’ve been known to make the occasional references to such things...). But it blows my mind when I hear of some of those folks who make millions every year demand even more. I remember reading about a basketball player in this millionaire category who tried to justify his further demands by saying he ‘had a family to feed.’ Unless he had a family of thousands, it’s kind of hard to feel too sorry for him. I just don’t get it.

The point is: everything we have, everything we are, everything we are able to do—it all comes from the grace, the power and the providential love of God. Yes, the work we do earns us an income to which we have a right. But who gave us the gifts and talents in the first place, those gifts that enable us to earn that income? You know the answer: almighty God himself. On the most fundamental level, we cannot claim an absolute right to anything at all. Life, freedom, faith, family, and all the other blessings—physical and spiritual—they all originate in God. George Washington and Abraham Lincoln and many others in our nation’s past knew that critical fact and wanted to make sure that we as a nation remember it as well.

And that is why we observe Thanksgiving Day in this uniquely blessed country of ours. We need to thank God always and in all circumstances—and not just when things are going smoothly. Remember: President Lincoln made his Thanksgiving proclamation in the middle of one of the bloodiest wars in American history. I do not ever for a moment want to trivialize or minimize the very real and serious struggles and sufferings of those who have to face illness, financial difficulties or other crises. But no one ever promised us a pain-free or trouble-free life, least of all God himself. Both the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures, Old and New Testaments alike, speak of the mystery of suffering built also of the presence and the saving power of God—and also of the thanks and gratitude of his people. Our reading tonight from Deuteronomy is that powerful reminder to the Israelites of how God delivered them from slavery in Egypt and how it was therefore their joyful duty to give thanks to God in a solemn way and as the people of God. In that reading from the letter to the Colossians, did you notice how many times St. Paul spoke of giving thanks in those few verses?

--“And be thankful.”

--“sing ... spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God”

--“whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything...giving thanks to God the Father.”

And notice what Paul did not say: he did not say “be thankful if life is a bowl of cherries”; he did not say “sing with gratitude, but only if you and your loved ones are all healthy.” There is never an occasion or a circumstance in life in which we can honestly say “I have nothing to be thankful for.” Stated more

positively, there is always some thanks, some gratitude we can and should offer to God. Even if a family member is serving this country in dangerous places like Iraq or Afghanistan, even if you or a loved one is recently unemployed or received a diagnosis of cancer, even if there is a breakdown in your marriage or other family relationship—even in the worst circumstances and the deepest darkness we have to confront, we can and should thank God. It is that divine existence, presence and loving grace that sustains us and keeps us going day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute.

And it is God who holds out to us the invitation and the promise of eternal life and perfect joy in his kingdom. We need to keep in mind that this earthly life—great gift that it is—is not our ultimate destination; it is not our true home. We are made for heaven and union with God—nothing less than that. And it is simply impossible for us to experience that complete fulfillment in this life. St. Augustine—one of the greatest intellects and spiritual writers of all time—expressed it so well in his “Confessions”, his spiritual autobiography: “You have made us for yourselves, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” In those darkest moments, in those times of deepest suffering, remember that truth. And then thank God for that priceless gift of hope. I’ll say it again: there is never an occasion or a circumstance in life in which we can honestly say “I have nothing to be thankful for.”

Several years ago I ran across a great quote: “The worst moment for an atheist is when he or she feels grateful and doesn’t know who to thank.” Thanks be to God that we don’t have that problem! Again, a blessed Thanksgiving to you all. And may the gratitude we offer to God in this prayer service and on this national holiday re-echo in our places of worship, our homes, and in our hearts the other 364 days of the year as well.