

A GOOD WAY TO GIVE THANKS
Sermon for Pentecost 24A (Thanksgiving) –Mt. 25:14-30
LPC, 11/19/17

Like so much else in American culture, Thanksgiving has a split personality. In a way, the split in Thanksgiving's personality is illustrative of the split between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of men.

Unlike Christmas, which has its origins in religion (both Christian and pagan), the holiday called Thanksgiving has its origins in American history and mythology. Thanksgiving is basically a civil holiday, established by presidential orders and acts of congress. Though obviously it has religious overtones for those of a religious bent.

: like one of Jesus' parables, it illustrates the deepest of truths: a story that gives a people identity, meaning and moral direction.

And what is the uber-truth of Thanksgiving for Americans? Actually this story of English religious refugees celebrating their first harvest in their new land with Native Americans is absolutely packed with American values: religious freedom, new opportunity for the daring, endurance through hardship, hard work, simple piety and gratitude, the fruitfulness of a generous land, hospitality, sharing, neighborliness, even interracial harmony.

That is one of Thanksgiving's personalities. That is the personality that has most in common with the kingdom of God. But as it has evolved, Thanksgiving has developed another personality in our culture. The story of Thanksgiving is a myth in the true sense of the word: not because it is untrue, but because it is uber-true.

The mostly good part of this other personality is Family. But travel to be with family is frequently fraught these days with traffic congestion on highways and crowded flights, so that more than one person dreads Thanksgiving for travel reasons alone. Then too, getting together with family is not something for which everyone is thankful. You may have seen the billboard advertising a special turkey sandwich which proclaims: "Thanksgiving... without *that* uncle."

Thanksgiving has acquired other associations, representing American values of which we might be less-than-completely-proud. The annual Macy's parade is offensively commercial, if you're sensitive to that sort of thing. What else does Thanksgiving now mean? Overindulgence in food and drink, and the beginning of the Christmas shopping season. There's also football, but I kind of like that part.

But my point is that insofar as the modern Thanksgiving stands for gluttony, materialism, acquisitiveness, and competition it represents a personality more emblematic of the kingdom of men than the kingdom of God.

Just as in the teaching of the Bible, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of men exist alongside each other in this world, in this life. We hope and believe that God will one day establish God's kingdom over all, but for now, both kingdoms coexist in our experience. Jesus, however, calls us, as much as we can, given the split personality of this life, to behave as citizens

of his Father's kingdom. This is why, as I'm often saying in my sermons, the Christian life is a profoundly counter-cultural life.

For the rest of this sermon I am going to suggest a way of celebrating Thanksgiving that may be somewhat counter-cultural: one that has more in common with the kingdom of God than the kingdom of men; one that may be, and perhaps ought to be, observed year-round and not just the third Thursday of November; one that is suggested by today's parable from Matthew.

In this parable, three servants are given treasure. Two of the servants invest their treasure and double it, thereby earning the joy of their master. The third servant protects and hides his treasure, making it unproductive, thereby earning a terrible punishment. This suggests that what we are given by God is something to invest, something to risk, in order that God's treasure may multiply and compound in the world. What we are given by God is not something to hold close and protect, but risk that it may grow.

What does this have to do with Thanksgiving? Well, the more aware among us use Thanksgiving as an opportunity to give thanks to God for what God has given us. Many people have started doing this already. There is an interesting, though perhaps limited, tradition on Facebook that every day during the month of November, people post one thing for which they are grateful. From reading these posts it is clear that God has shared a lot of treasure, a lot of talents, if you will.

Parenthetically, a talent was a unit of weight of some precious metal: gold, silver, or something else. We are not told what the talents in the story were made of, but it's safe to say they represented some considerable wealth.

So, we all have been given some talents, each according to our ability. We all have been given treasure from God. We are not to hug this treasure to ourselves. We are not merely to be grateful that we have found our personal relationship with Jesus and not pass on, somehow, the value of that relationship. We are to risk it, that it may multiply and compound.

Let me give some examples of how this may happen. Please turn to page 837 in your Prayer Book. This is a Litany of Thanksgiving, and it mentions several treasures that God has shared with people and for which people are grateful: the wonder and beauty of creation; graciousness in the lives of men and women; food, shelter, family, friends; our capacity for reason, love, work and play; courage, patience; the pursuit of truth, liberty and justice; the communion of saints; and the mercies and promises of Jesus Christ.

I invite you to contemplate how these treasures may be paid forward. If you treasure the beauty of creation, support conservation and beautification efforts. If you are grateful for adequate food and shelter, contribute to and participate in efforts to feed and house less fortunate people. If you treasure your family and friends, reach out to someone who has none. Let your thanks not take the form of burying your treasure. Let your thanks to God take the form of a high-risk investment of the treasure God has given you.

Paying it forward is a counter-cultural way to give thanks, it does represent risk, but like high-risk investments it also has the greatest potential for growth. And enabling growth is what we are called to do with the treasures God has given us.