

November 18, 2012

## **THANKSGIVING-THE DISCIPLINE OF GRATITUDE**

by Pastor Clarissa Martinelli

Philippians 4:4-9

*<sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! <sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup> Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

*<sup>8</sup> Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. <sup>9</sup> Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.*

I want to share this quote with you from a noted politician. He said, “We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven; we have been preserved these many years in peace and prosperity; we have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us, and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own.”

Which presidential candidate made these provocative statements? That’s from Abraham Lincoln in 1863, written as part of his presidential proclamation for Thanksgiving Day. He went on to say this: “It has seemed to me fit and proper that God should be solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged, as with one heart and one voice, by the whole American people. I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November as a day of Thanksgiving and praise to God who dwelleth in the heavens.”

I wonder how closely our 2012 celebration of Thanksgiving reflects what President Lincoln had in mind. Do we use this day to remember all our blessings from God?

Do we use this well-earned day of rest to give thanks and praise to our God? Are we thankful for more than just an extra day off and elastic waistbands?

A few years ago, John Grisham wrote a book in which the main family, who was always known for their lavish holiday displays, decided they were going to forgo the festivities one year and vacation someplace sunny. The name of the book was "Skipping Christmas." I'm wondering this year if we shouldn't consider skipping Thanksgiving. When you get right down to it, it doesn't seem like there's much to be thankful for. You know it's a sad commentary when we get excited that gas is only \$2.75 a gallon. The economy, the war, the environment – really, what is there to celebrate this Thanksgiving? Even if we sleep through Nov. 22, I'm sure there will be plenty of leftovers the next day.

That's a silly idea, right? Who would dare skip Thanksgiving? I want you to think about what you would miss if we decided to cancel Thanksgiving. What would you miss? Maybe the home-cooked meal with all your favorite dishes. Or getting together with your relatives, which my family and friends are looking forward to doing. Maybe you'd miss relaxing after the meal to watch football or go to a movie. Maybe you'd miss a few days rest from your lives. If we skipped Thanksgiving this year, what would you miss?

Whatever you'd miss is what I want you to be thankful for today. Often times, true gratitude only kicks in when something is threatened. Like the old line says, "You don't know what you got til it's gone." Thanksgiving is a time to stop and take stock of what we have, and doing so will hopefully produce in us overwhelming feelings of gratitude.

Giving thanks is one of the difficult parts of faith for one simple reason: When things are going great, we tend to forget the importance of giving thanks and when things are going badly we struggle to find something to give thanks for! Of course, these feelings of gratitude don't occur for everyone. Some people only see what they wish they had. Resentment makes us say, "I didn't get what I deserved." But true gratitude says, "I didn't deserve what I got." As Henri Nouwen says, "Gratitude goes beyond 'mine' and 'thine' and claims the truth that all of life is a pure gift. The discipline of gratitude is the explicit effort to acknowledge that all that we are and have is given to us as a gift of love, a gift to be celebrated with joy."

The discipline of gratitude. Those two words don't seem to go together, do they? We think of discipline as something stern, rigid, requiring practice and dedication, while gratitude is spontaneous, free-flowing, and effervescent. Gratitude is a choice on our part. We can choose to respond to our situations with resentment, with despair, or with gratitude. That takes practice, it takes discipline. And yet, if we really want to live a life that says "Thank you", we will take our faith seriously, because that is the great thanksgiving to God for what God has done.

And yet, here we are at Thanksgiving Sunday, prompted and challenged once again to look at our lives and lift our voices to God in praise. Giving thanks is not an attitude, it's not an emotion and it's more than an expression of faith. It's a way of life. We are not called simply to give thanks; we are called to live thankfully. We give thanks to God not just through our words but through the way we live our lives and use the gifts God has given us. On July 4th, we remember our independence. But on Thanksgiving, we acknowledge our dependence.

John Henry Jowett said, "Gratitude is a vaccine, an antitoxin, and an antiseptic." Gratitude can be a vaccine that can prevent the invasion of a disgruntled attitude. As antitoxins prevent the disastrous effects of certain poisons and diseases, Thanksgiving destroys the poison of faultfinding and grumbling. When trouble has smitten us, a spirit of thanksgiving is a soothing antiseptic.

Today, we pause, step back, and admire God's creative work in our lives over the past year. We stop to give thanks to God, not just because it's Thanksgiving Sunday, not because God needs to be thanked, but because we need to be thankful. Charles Jefferson said, "Gratitude is born in hearts that take time to count up past mercies." Today we pause to count up our past mercies, to name them to each other, and then, as Paul instructs us, to give thanks in all circumstances. This morning is a chance to say "Thank you" to God. I am thankful for you. I couldn't imagine a more loving, supportive church. You, Salem family, have been wonderful to my family and me during these past four months. I thank you for being such a faithful church family, and I thank God for sending me here. You are truly a blessing to me.

I ask you, if you would like, to share at least something for which you want to give God thanks this year.

To God be the glory.