

“Thanksgiving Flowing from Reconciliation”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden
for First UMC, Grand Junction, Sunday, Nov. 19, 2023

This sermon can be listened to on the FUMCGJ website: www.fumcgj.org/media/

Scripture Text: Luke 10:38-42 [NLT]

OPENING



Balance...as the picture shows, something so hard to achieve and so precarious – and yet, so beautiful.

The clarity with which Jesus defended Mary’s choice for **balance** in her life gives us the perfect launch point for a sermon on thanksgiving, not “Thanksgiving” with a capital T – as in the holiday celebrated later this week – but thanksgiving as the result of life lived in balance. When the heart and soul are reconciled to the complexities of life – its joys and sorrows, its beauty and its ugliness, its justice and unfairness. In other words, the life Jesus came to participate in, save, and redeem.

For the deeply committed follower of Christ, this reconciliation to the way things are leads to peace, perspective, and grounding along with the spiritual

resources needed to live in contentment trusting that God permeates all of it, working to maintain the balance. And that leads to thanksgiving as a response to life.

Ray Stannard Baker, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist from the first half of the 20th century, seemed to have this in mind a century ago when he wrote these words about Thanksgiving:

Thanksgiving is the holiday of peace, the celebration of work and the simple life... a true folk-festival that speaks the poetry of the turn of the seasons, the beauty of seedtime and harvest, the ripe product of the year - and the deep, deep connection of all these things with God. ~Ray Stannard Baker (pen name: David Grayson)

November being Native American heritage month, I thought I would share these words of wisdom from that tradition:

Give thanks for unknown blessings already on their way. ~Native American Saying

A little closer to our time, any one of us could have penned these words after one of our gluttonous Thanksgiving feasts:

The thing I'm most thankful for right now is elastic waistbands. ~Author Unknown

SERMON THOUGHTS

For a while now, Thanksgiving has probably been my favorite holiday of the year. Even though

Thanksgiving is being threatened by market pressures and the “Thanksgiving Friday” shopping frenzy, it has still retained something of its purity for me with:

- Its emphasis on simply sharing time and conversation with family and friends around a table of abundance overflowing with all kinds of good things to eat and drink – an end in themselves but also symbolic, symbolic of the abundant blessings of God in our lives.
- Thanksgiving also calls to us to dig deep and acknowledge that we are not ultimately self-sufficient, that we rely on a Source outside of ourselves for our sustenance and nurture. In fact, William Jennings Bryan put it in these sparse yet penetrating terms: “On Thanksgiving Day, we acknowledge our dependence.”
Period.

TRANSITION: Thanksgiving and Native American Culture

Speaking of dependence, long before Thanksgiving was a national holiday for us in this country, it was an acknowledgement of appreciation for the Native Americans whose “**amazing grace**” helped to ensure the survival of the strange-looking foreigners who had landed on their shores. It wasn’t a token expression, and it wasn’t as simple as we were all taught in grade school. Echoing William Jennings Bryan, one of the sources I consulted for this sermon noted that the

colonists knew they were alive only because of the help of these American Indians who showed them how to fish for eel, grow corn and barley, harvest and make use of the trees in the heavily forested woodlands, and hunt – for fowl, including wild turkeys and waterfowl, and deer.

All of these found their place in the Thanksgiving celebration of 1621 in Plymouth, MA. It was attended by some 90 Indians who had initially shown up out of suspicion of the roar of cannon and gunfire that were part of the European settlers’ expressions of thanks for their blessings. When it was apparent that the 50 or so pale-skinned strangers meant no harm to the Native peoples, they joined in the celebration which, in accordance with Native American practice, lasted 3 days! Can you imagine how much we’d weigh if our Thanksgiving lasted 3 days?!

Gratitude remains a central value of the Native American people. Ramona Peters, the Historic Preservation Officer with the Wampanoag tribe, the tribe associated with the Thanksgiving celebration of 1621, described thanksgiving in beautiful terms in a magazine interview once. She said, “...a heartfelt Thanksgiving is very important...” She went on, “... For me, it’s a state of being. You want to live in a state of thanksgiving, meaning that you use the creativity that the Creator gave you. You use your talents. You find out what those are and you cultivate them and that...[puts] thanks[giving] in[to] action.”

As we explored last week, that spirit of “living in a state of thanksgiving” can happen in nearly any circumstances. The Rev. Bruce Blake, now-retired United Methodist bishop of the Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference, was serving that Conference (in May of 1999) when an F5 tornado hit Bridge Creek and Moore, OK with winds in excess of 300 mph, the highest windspeeds for a tornado ever recorded – globally! In the aftermath, the Conference leadership gathered the Anglos and the Indians together to explore sharing in a collaborative response to the devastation.

After the initial meeting, Bishop Bruce confided to one of the other leaders, “This isn’t going to work, is it?” “No, it’s not,” was the response. Why? Because of the drastically different worldviews of the two groups. The Anglos, Bishop Bruce told me, had in their minds that this event was something to be overcome, “fixed”, with life restored to “normal” as quickly as possible in witness to the people’s “triumphing” over tragedy and disaster.

The Native Americans’ understanding of life is that it is tragic, and this tornado was not something to be triumphed over but accepted as part of the drama of life. Their response was to pull together and experience the fragile quality of life as something sacred precisely because it is so fragile. The tornado gave them the occasion to express their deeply held common bonds of family and tribe, to lament together the loss of life, crops, and shelter, and to comfort one

another precisely by not “moving on” but rather, embracing the tragedy – and in the midst of it being able to give thanks (“...for unknown blessings already on their way”.)

TRANSITION: Picking Up on Last Sunday’s Sermon

I can’t help but see in this story a kindred spirit between the Oklahoma Indians and the message last week admonishing us, “When life gives you lemons, ...make lemonade” – That is, be grateful in spite of circumstance because of God’s life-giving Spirit and transforming presence in the world and in our lives.

The sermon title for today implies a connection between “thanksgiving” and “reconciliation”. As I’ve been hinting at, by “reconciliation”, I don’t mean the process by which past hurts are forgiven and a relationship healed.

I mean “balance”. I mean a sense of wholeness and being in synch with the grand sweep of life with God in the midst of it. I mean the peace that comes from the Native American embrace of life in all its tragedy and fragility, its interconnectedness, and its potential for grandness – even though their experience over the last half-a-millennium has been anything but grand.

Reconciliation that finds expression–

- In correcting patterns of judgment and prejudice that dishonor our common humanity
- In addressing injustice and unkindness when it is within our power to do so

- In refusing to endorse self-serving values while ignoring atrocities committed against humanity here and around the world
- In attempting this hard work rather than succumbing to bitterness, cynicism, and hardness of heart.

Speaking of the hard work of reconciliation, I want to leave you with a story of an unlikely playing out of the kind of reconciliation I'm talking about. It involves a governor who came into office with a state legislature that was dominated by the opposite party.

Early in his term, the governor met with the opposition leader of the legislative branch with the hopes of building a cooperative partnership for the future. The meeting was a total failure! It went awful! There was no trust, no agreement, and no absence of conflict.

At the end of the session as the governor got up to leave, he suddenly reached over and grabbed the opposition leader with both hands on his neck and gave him a big kiss on the cheek.

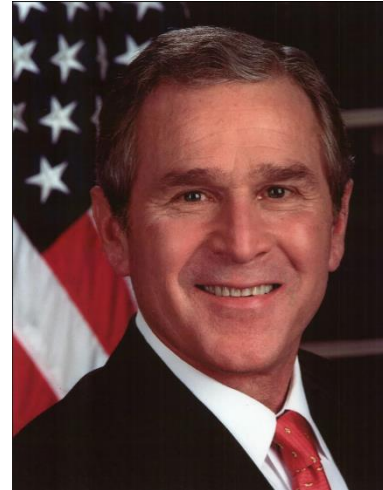
The man was completely stunned. He got red faced and stammered, "What did you do THAT for?!"

The governor said, "If I can't get your cooperation and help, I'm at least going to get a kiss!"

The opposition leader broke up laughing, and that was the beginning of a strong friendship, the end of their

conflict, and a fruitful legislative agenda. Go figure....

The governor?



George W. Bush

Story from:
<http://www.sermoncentral.com/illustrations/stories-about-reconciliation.asp>

Now, I'm not recommending Bush's tactics, but I do think he understood that while a partnership based on common values and a shared sense of mission may not always be possible, "reconciliation" in the sense of wholeness, interconnectedness, and mutual respect for others just might be. And that is certainly worth the risk of a kiss on the cheek – Thanks be to God!

♪ Hymn of Response: "Amazing Grace / Peaceful, Easy Feeling"