

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**Thanksgiving Sunday**  
**Sunday, November 19, 2023**  
**10am**

Text: Deuteronomy 8:7-18

Theme: Season of Saints: Thanksgiving of the Saints

[prayer]

At our Coeur Team meeting on Thursday, our friend Sharry Robinson shared some Thanksgiving thoughts with us. She told us about a client at her hair salon who, instead of wishing people a happy Thanksgiving, would wish them a happy Giving Thanks Day.

I was delighted by this woman's whimsy, but Sharry emphasized that her client reversed the words in "thanksgiving" to make a point: We forget the purpose of Thanksgiving Day.

In our culture thanksgiving has mostly become something we consume, rather than something we offer God. Thanksgiving conjures associations like food, football, family, parades with giant inflatable turkeys, and the start of the holiday season. These are generally pleasant associations. Less pleasant associations might include arguments in the kitchen, disagreeable politics at the dinner table, people getting trampled at Walmart, indigestion, disappointment, loneliness. While many of us will fellowship with family and friends on Thursday, others will eat alone. Some will eat in nursing homes, soup kitchens, or on a cold street corner. Some will work long hours so everyone else can enjoy a day off. Some will tend to the sick and the dying. Some will grieve an empty chair at their table.

What will your Thanksgiving Day look like? Mine will hopefully be typical, more typical than last year at least, when COVID decided to invite itself to the party. A recent family emergency has me reflecting on the gifts of health and healthcare, so I am trying to nurture that grateful awareness this year. Gratitude springs more easily to mind when we have experienced deprivation and loss, or the threat thereof. It shouldn't be this way, but so often it is.

[pause]

As we conclude our brief season of saints, we name our third characteristic of everyday sainthood: A saint gives thanks. “Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in every situation because this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess 5:16-18).

We know the command, but why is it so hard to live it?

Our Scripture lesson gives us some insight. For forty years the Hebrew people wandered in the wilderness. Fed by manna and water from a rock, they survived on God’s provision and faithfulness alone. They held out hope for the Promised Land, where they would no longer feel the ache of hunger and want. This land would be ripe with nutritious food and overflowing with natural resources. In this land they and their children would do more than just survive – they would thrive.

This promise sustained the Hebrews through the long and lean wilderness years. Finally, the promise was coming to pass. No longer would the people be in danger of starving. No longer would they suffer the harsh environment and privations of the wilderness. At last, they would have homes to live in, and livestock they could sell for money. At last, they would break the cycle of poverty, of never having enough, of being slaves to their bodily needs.

We can never underestimate how strongly the needs of our bodies determine our sense of wellbeing. This is why the vision of the Promised Land is so focused on food and shelter. But Moses knew that even after these needs were met, danger still awaited the Hebrew people. God would deliver them from the dangers of the wilderness. But if they were not careful, they would immediately fall prey to a more subtle danger. They would be at risk of endangering their souls by forgetting the God who delivered them into this land of plenty.

Moses warned: “Watch yourself! When you eat, get full, build nice houses, and settle down, and when your herds and your flocks are growing large, your silver and gold are multiplying, and everything you have is thriving, don’t become arrogant, forgetting the Lord your God: the one who rescued you from Egypt, from the house of slavery; the one who led you through this vast and terrifying desert;

the one who made water flow for you out of a hard rock; the one who fed you manna in the wilderness” (vv. 11-16 CEB).

In other words: *Do not forget the One who made all this possible.*

[pause]

In both the Jewish and Christian traditions, we practice something called “sacred memory.” Our understanding of who God is in the present is based on who God was in the past – yesterday, a week ago, last year – in our lives and the lives of our ancestors in faith. We experience God’s faithfulness in the stories of the saints who have gone before us just as much as we experience God’s faithfulness to ourselves. These are stories of plenty and stories of poverty. When we have very little, the memory of God’s faithfulness sustains our faith. Sacred memory helps us trust that God will provide.

But when the opposite comes to pass and we have more than enough, our abundance can make us arrogant and greedy. We are tempted to forget God and His commandments. The free market, despite all it has done to lift individuals and nations out of poverty, is also an idol that lulls us into worshiping ourselves. We neglect the God who has provided the very means for our success. Moses warned the people, “Don’t think to yourself, My own strength and abilities have produced all this prosperity for me. Remember the Lord your God! He’s the one who gives you the strength to be prosperous in order to establish the covenant he made with your ancestors” (vv. 17-18). Any prosperity or good fortune we experience is not for our glory, but for the glory of the One who leads us from death to fullness of life.

Sacred memory is a critical spiritual discipline because it keeps us humble and trains us in the art of gratitude. We cannot separate our success in life from the very Giver of Life. All that we are and everything we have exists by the words of God. When Jesus was facing deprivation in the wilderness, and the devil tempted him to turn a stone into a loaf of bread, he drew from this very passage in Deuteronomy to rebut the devil’s temptation. “It is written, *People do not live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God*” (Matt 4:4). To be wholly human, our bodily needs must be met. But our most fundamental need will always be

spiritual. Moses and Jesus remind us that human life has no higher wealth and sustenance than the words of God.

As followers of Jesus, we proclaim that these words have found their summation in the ultimate Word, Jesus Christ. His body and blood feeds our spirits. At this table we practice the discipline of sacred memory. We remember the covenant God made with our ancestors. We remember God's faithfulness to them even when they were unfaithful. We remember how God's faithfulness was poured out on the cross and sealed for all eternity at the resurrection. We remember how God's faithfulness continues to echo through the generations in the new covenant God has made with His church.

And what do we do when we come to this table? We eat this bread. We drink this cup. And we give thanks for our manna and water from a rock. In Greek, the eucharist – what we call Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper – means "thanksgiving" or "to be thankful." This is why we call our communion liturgy the Great Thanksgiving. John Wesley exhorted Methodists to take communion as often as they could. We neglect the sacrament at our peril because giving God thanks is how we nourish our spirits. In seasons of plenty and seasons of lack, we gather at this table and are fed with the holy mystery of Emmanuel – God with us.

A saint keeps the sacred memory alive, recalling and giving thanks for God's provision of God's own self. This act of gratitude extends beyond the sacrament of communion. For "We offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving as a living sacrifice..." We give God thanks with our lives – lives that wear the compassion of Christ and proclaim the story of grace. We become little thanksgivings in the world, living out the Great Thanksgiving wherever we are.

This is the thanksgiving of the saints. How shaped by The Great Thanksgiving is your life? How might a life of thanksgiving for God's mighty acts of salvation, unfolding from day to day, give you the strength to tell the story of the saints and wear the clothing of the saints with confidence and joy?

[pause]

Because of our transition to a fiscal accounting year, we have postponed our annual giving campaign to the spring. The Coeur Team and I give thanks for the

ways each of you support the ministry of this community through your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness. We appeal to your continued faithfulness to the mission God has given our church. As you receive the Lord's Supper today, may this act of thanksgiving renew your faith in a God who is faithful to provide. And may each one of you know a very happy Giving Thanks Day!

Amen.