

Thanks and Giving

November 23, 2008

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, With Thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 4:6-7

Thanksgiving is upon us again. We will set the table with Susan’s grandmother’s china and get out the good table cloth and napkins. We will have turkey and dressing and yams with onions and garlic, along with homemade applesauce and hot buttered rolls. It will be a special meal, a feast to be grateful for!

But the meal is made special not so much by the food, which will be wonderful, but by the family gathered around the table. It is because of who is there that we are really thankful. This year we have for the first time experienced the empty nest...with both girls away at college or working (and both). So, this is the first year that they are both “coming home for Thanksgiving”. It will be exciting to meet Rebecca’s plane and to see Katie’s car coming up the driveway. We look forward to the house being full of noise and clutter again, and the warmth around the thanksgiving table is more than just good food...but love for one another. This year is special because we can sense that in years to come, there will be times when they can’t make it home.

And so it is that the things we are often most grateful for are not things at all, but people! When we pause to count our blessings, they more often than not are people not things. Often the truth at Thanksgiving is that it is not the food, it is the guest list that matters most.

And that is as it should be. When we look at Jesus’ ministry and the images that he gives us for the kingdom of God...it is most often

described as a wedding feast or a dinner, with all kinds of people at the table. Jesus' ministry is one of inclusion, where everyone is invited to the table and each person is valued and important. This is one of the things that drove the religious leaders of his day nuts. They broke the world down into various groups of people...us and them. The considered themselves and those like them to be God's treasured and precious chosen children. The rest of the world, well, they thought of them as barbarians and as worthy only of God's judgment and scorn. They had all kinds of tests to see if a person was holy enough or faithful enough to be included in their narrow view of God's chosen people.

And along came Jesus, the Son of God...who came from heaven to demonstrate the love of God and to show the world God's great care and compassion. He invited to the table ordinary people, who were too busy making a living and struggling to make ends meet to follow all the many laws and religious rituals they had established. But Jesus includes the ordinary people at the Table of the Lord.

And if that was not bad enough, Jesus gave equal place to women! He did not consider them as somehow inferior to men in God's eyes...but rather included them in his ministry and at the Table he set.

And Jesus goes further...he includes the outcast and the sinner. Those who have lived lives of desperation and difficulty, who have made mistakes and big ones at that. Yet they find in Jesus a warm welcome and hearty invitation to come to the banquet. The poor are invited as are the sick and the needy. The Pharisees complained that Jesus was a friend to sinners and tax collectors. Even tax collectors!

Jesus gives us the image of the table as one of the ways to think about the kingdom of God. And at that table there are chairs for everyone; rich or poor, man or woman, black or white, Asian or Hispanic, young or old...all are invited to participate in the great feast of Love.

Jesus includes children at the table. He makes a special reference to the little children. His disciples want to send the mother's and their children away, but Jesus stops them. He draws the children unto himself and blesses them, and tells us that we need to become like the little children. I think that this has a special significance for thanksgiving.

When you walk with a two year old, you don't go very fast. It is not because their legs are small, but because they are always stopping to look at things. A beautiful flower, a bug crawling on the sidewalk, or the reflection of the sky in a puddle. Little children take the time to notice what is around them, the many small wonders and blessings that we overlook. We as adults are always in a hurry. Our lives are very hectic, and the Christmas season only adds to the pressure and the hurried and harried feeling we have. Many dread this time of year, rather than rejoice in it.

We need to take a lesson from the children and walk slower as we go through thanksgiving. We need to take the time to really look at our surroundings...what is crossing our path, what is nearby that shows the beauty of the earth or the glory of God in some small way. To slow down and see things in your life that you overlook in your hurry to get to work or to school or wherever.

Take a moment to look at the things in your life that matter..the people and the things that make your life meaningful and fun. Observe beauty...the color of the trees, the joy of family around the table, the autumn blue of the sky, or some small wonder or beautiful thing you might otherwise overlook.

Take your postcard and pause for a few moments to consider what you overlook...what you walk by or take for granted. Write down a few

things that you are thankful for...they can be big or small, obvious or obscure...in your mind, take a two year old's walk and give thanks.

Now I want you to take the second post card.

Thanksgiving is about taking the time to give thanks for everything...even those things that are difficult. Not just the good things, but the hard things can bring blessing to our lives and depth to our faith. We have to look beyond the thing itself...below it above it, around it...and see the blessings of God.

We are told to be anxious for nothing, but in everything to pray...with thanksgiving.

God is at work in the hard things and even the bad things in our lives. He is often at work beneath them, holding us up and giving us the strength and support we need to continue on. He is often at work around them...through the people who love us through them or in spite of them. He is there working in the circumstances and situations around us, so we can see his blessing even in the bad things. He is at work within us, helping us trust him more and learn to live in dependence upon God and interdependence with others...and to help us grow strong in our faith. And he is at work above them, to help us look higher and to give us hope for tomorrow and beyond.

Take a moment on your second post card to write down a thing or two you are not thankful for...that are hard or bad or difficult... And then look for how God is at work and what you can give things for even in the midst of it.

And remember the first post card's list, which shows us that there are blessings in our lives...while there are hard times as well. Give thanks in everything...for God is at work in all things for GOOD.

The Bible says that all good gifts come from God...everything we have that is good comes from God's hands. Thanksgiving is a chance for us to take some time to remember our blessings and give thanks.