

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Last Thanksgiving we produced a pre-recorded Thanksgiving Eve service together with the other three ELCA congregations in town because we were still half a year away from in-person of any kind. This year, well, here we are – able to gather in person again thanks to the quick development of vaccines, and other measures like masking and physical distancing. We're still not back to normal by any means, and this pandemic continues to take its toll. But even so, there is much to be thankful for when we think of the difference between this year and last.

But I think that the pandemic has also given us other opportunities for giving thanks as well. Bearing in mind the illness, unemployment, and death this pandemic has brought upon too many of our fellow citizens and others around the world, the disruption of our routines has also given many of us new perspective on our lives that we would not have had otherwise. Those of us who have homes have come to appreciate them for having had to spend so much time in them. Many people, my household included, took up gardening over the past two summers. Those of us who had the possibility of working remotely discovered the joys of not having to commute, or to factor in travel times for meetings. Many of you know that serve on our synod's candidacy committee. That committee has three meetings a year, which until recently were always held at the synod office in Springfield. That's an hour and twenty minutes each way from here, give or take. But when we lived in Carbondale, that was a three-hour trip each way. And there are others who live equally far away up toward the Quad Cities. This is a big synod geographically. Thanks to meeting software like Zoom, we have been able to continue meeting throughout the pandemic. And while it is always nicer to meet in person, none of us missed the commute, or the cost and emissions of driving back and forth. Our ability to make that transition so seamlessly was helped by the fact that we had already moved one of our three meetings online several years before the pandemic. Going forward, though, we plan to hold at least two of them online on a permanent basis.

But even beyond these significant changes, the disruption has been even more life-changing for some. I don't know anyone personally who fits into this category, but I have been reading about people who are rethinking their life plans and their relationship to work. It's no secret that there is a significant shortage of people who are unwilling to work under the same conditions and for the same pay that was common before the pandemic. Whether this is on balance a positive trend or not is still to be seen, I think. But from what I read this has been a time for many people to rethink their priorities in life, and that is just where our Gospel reading is taking us this evening.

I think there are three things embedded in this reading that are relevant to our Thanksgiving celebration this weekend. The first is the least obvious, but it is implied in worrying about our life, what we will eat, what we will wear, and so on. The implication here is that these things are up to us, and that we think we have control over them. What that means for thanksgiving is that when things are going well our tendency is to give ourselves the credit. One commentator I consulted noted the generic way we talk about "being thankful" at this time of year without including the object of our thanks. Of course that's understandable in a pluralistic society like ours, where we are careful not to impose our religious beliefs on others (we meaning, most of us.) But being vague about whom we are thankful to can feed into our assumptions about what we control, and can default in our minds to ourselves, so that our thanksgiving sounds like

that of the Pharisee in the story about the Pharisee and the tax collector: “O Lord, I thank you that I am not like other people. Look how good and successful I am, and what a miserable failure so many others are.” Of course we would never be so crass, even in our private thoughts. But our underlying assumptions color our gratitude.

The second thing to notice in this reading is how Jesus undercuts those assumptions. “You are not ultimately in control,” he reminds us. “What you have ultimately comes to you by the goodness of God.” We might have expected the pandemic to make that clearer to us. Part of what started some of us gardening, for instance, was an awareness that we don’t produce our own food. That’s not how the modern world is set up. We depend on other for that. Sure, we pay money for that, but money is only worth what we agree it’s worth. And experience tells us that in times of crisis, it’s not worth what we assumed. Food, on the other hand, which we tend to take for granted, turns out to be priceless in crisis situations. The implication for thanksgiving, of course, is clear. Our awareness of our dependence upon others, and ultimately upon God, makes our gratitude much less self-centered, and much more profound and heartfelt.

The final thing to notice is where Jesus is directing our attention here when he takes it off our mundane, individualistic concerns. “Strive first for the kingdom of God, and his righteousness” Jesus tells us. As we heard in our celebration of the festival of Christ the King this past Sunday, God’s kingdom is not like our governments and systems that operate on power, violence, and exploitation of the weak by the strong. God rules us by coming among us as one of us in Jesus, bringing healing, liberation, and hope for all those who are crushed under the load of our business-as-usual way of dealing with one another in this world. What this means for our thanksgiving is that when we are aware of the reality of our dependence on God and become truly thankful, we are moved to concern for those whom God cares for, and respond to the blessings we have received by becoming instruments of blessing for others.

With all of this in mind, I want you to listen to our Gospel reading one more time, but this time, from a strongly paraphrased version of the Bible:

“If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers—most of which are never even seen—don’t you think he’ll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you? What I’m trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with getting, so you can respond to God’s giving. People who don’t know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don’t worry about missing out. You’ll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.”

Confident in God’s provision for us and for the world God loves in Jesus Christ, may we be truly thankful throughout our celebrations in the coming days. May our thanksgiving open our hearts to those even more in need of blessing that we are and find expression in concrete and meaningful acts of faith active in love for others. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.