

THANKSGIVING IS SO MUCH MORE THAN A SECULAR HOLIDAY OR AN ANNUAL COMMUNITY WORSHIP SERVICE.

THANKSGIVING IS A VITAL PART OF OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, MUCH LIKE EXPRESSING GRATITUDE IS IMPORTANT IN HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS.

WHY IS GIVING THANKS TO GOD, AS WELL AS TO OTHER PEOPLE SO IMPORTANT?

BY OFFERING THANKSGIVING TO GOD, IT ENCOURAGES US TO REMEMBER THE LORD'S BLESSINGS AND THINK ABOUT HIS LOVE FOR US AND FOR OTHERS.

AND WHEN IT COMES TO THANKING ONE ANOTHER, THE GIVING AND RECEIVING OF THANKS DEEPENS THE BONDS OF OUR RELATIONSHIPS, OFTEN IN WAYS WE DO NOT REALIZE.

THIS YEAR IS A VERY SPECIAL TIME FOR THANKSGIVING, BECAUSE WE COMMEMORATE THE 400TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FIRST THANKSGIVING FEAST HELD BY THE PILGRIMS IN THE NEW WORLD.

IN THE FALL OF 1621, THEY GATHERED WITH MEMBERS OF THE WAMPANOAG TRIBE TO ENJOY THE HARVEST AFTER AN HARSH AND DIFFICULT WINTER THAT TOOK THE LIVES OF ALMOST HALF OF THEIR NUMBER.

THE HARVEST FEAST WAS NOT JUST A CELEBRATION OF FOOD BUT A TIME TO GIVE THANKS TO THE LORD FOR HIS GRACE, AS WELL AS FOR THE BOUNTIFUL HARVEST.

WE ALSO GATHER TOGETHER TO GIVE THANKS TO THE LORD, WHO IS GOOD AND WHOSE STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER.

ALTHOUGH OUR CIRCUMSTANCES ARE VASTLY DIFFERENT FROM THE PILGRIMS THERE ARE SOME SIMILARITIES BETWEEN 1621 AND 2021.

WE ALSO HAVE COME THROUGH A HARSH WINTER, ONE OF A GLOBAL PANDEMIC, AS WELL AS SOCIAL AND POLITICAL STRIFE.

AND FOR US THIS IS OUR SECOND THANKSGIVING IN THE MIDST OF COVID-19.

BUT WE ALSO GATHER TOGETHER IN GRATITUDE TO THE LORD OUR GOD FOR HIS GRACE, AND FOR THE BOUNTY OF BLESSINGS WE HAVE RECEIVED IN SPITE OF ALL WE BEEN THROUGH.

THIS GATHERING, LIKE THAT OF THE PILGRIMS AND THEIR NATIVE FRIENDS, IS A TESTIMONY TO FAITH IN GOD'S LOVE AND PROVISION, EVEN IN THE MIDST OF LOSS.

MUCH LIKE THE PILGRIMS FACED AN UNCERTAIN WINTER, IN SPITE OF THE BOUNTY OF THEIR HARVEST, WE ALSO FACE SOME UNCERTAINTY, ESPECIALLY CONCERNING THE END OF THE PANDEMIC.

AND YET WE HAVE COME INTO THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD IN THE COMPANY OF OTHERS TO GIVE THANKS.

TRULY, THANKSGIVING TO GOD IS ONE OF THE IMPORTANT TEACHINGS AND PROCLAMATIONS OF SCRIPTURE.

ALL FOUR OF THE READINGS THIS EVENING TOUCH UPON OUR NEED TO GIVE THANKS TO GOD FOR HIS FAITHFULNESS AND LOVE.

GIVING THANKS EVEN IN THE MIDST OF GRIEF, DIFFICULT, OR UNCERTAIN TIMES IS A TESTIMONY TO OUR FAITH AND TRUST IN GOD.

THE THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY FOR CHRISTIANS IN PARTICULAR, SHOULD BE A TIME TO ACKNOWLEDGE OUR NEED FOR GOD- FROM WHOM ALL BLESSINGS FLOW, EVEN AS WE CELEBRATE WITH FEASTING AND OTHER ACTIVITIES.

AND, TONIGHT IN OUR PRAYER TIME, WE WILL HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE KNOWN TO OTHERS WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR US, AS WE EXPRESS ALOUD OUR THANKS.

SO NOW, LET US LOOK AT SCRIPTURE'S CALL TO GIVE THANKS TO THE LORD.

THE HYMN-LIKE PRAISE FOUND IN 1 CHRONICLES REMINDS US OF THE LONG HISTORY OF GOD'S FAITHFULNESS AND LOVE TOWARDS THE WORLD HE CREATED.

GOD IS THE CREATOR OF EVERYONE AND EVERYTHING, FOR THIS ALONE HE IS WORTHY OF OUR PRAISE.

BUT IT IS ALSO BECAUSE OF GOD'S LOVE AND MERCY WE ARE EVEN MORE SO CALLED TO EXPRESS OUR THANKS TO THE LORD OF LORDS.

HOW DO WE DO THIS? ONE WAY IS TO GLORIFY THE NAME OF THE LORD, THROUGH: WORSHIP, PRAYER, AND OUR DECLARATIONS OF THANKS.

IN THE READING FROM MATTHEW, JESUS HIMSELF MODELED THIS BY EXPRESSING THANKSGIVING TO HIS FATHER, OUT LOUD, JUST BEFORE HE CALLED PEOPLE TO COME TO HIM FOR REST.

ANOTHER WAY WE CAST OUR GRATITUDE TOWARDS GOD FOR HIS BLESSINGS IS BY BRINGING AN OFFERING TO HIM.

THE LATE MR. RODGERS, WHO WAS NOT ONLY A CHILDREN'S TV HOST, BUT ALSO AN ORDAINED MINISTER, SAID THIS ABOUT BLESSINGS:

“THE REAL ISSUE IN LIFE IS NOT HOW MANY BLESSINGS WE HAVE, BUT WHAT WE DO WITH OUR BLESSINGS.

SOME PEOPLE HAVE MANY BLESSINGS AND HOARD THEM, SOME HAVE FEW AND GIVE EVERYTHING AWAY.”

HIS WORDS REMIND US ABOUT THE BIBLE'S TEACHING THAT ONE OF THE WAYS WE MAKE AN OFFERING TO GOD IS BY GIVING MONEY OR ITEMS TO OTHERS WHO ARE IN NEED.

OUR COLLECTION TONIGHT OF BOTH MONEY AND FOOD IS ONE, WAY WE SHOW GOD OUR GRATITUDE BY SHARING WITH OTHERS SOME OF THE BLESSINGS WE HAVE RECEIVED.

INDIVIDUALS AND CONGREGATIONS HAVE MANY OTHER WAYS OF DOING THIS AS WELL.

WE GIVE THROUGH THINGS LIKE: CHRISTMAS MAGIC, THE ANGEL FUND, AND OPERATION CHRISTMAS CHILD SHOE BOXES.

SOME CHURCHES HAVE BLESSING BOXES OR OTHER PROGRAMS THAT GIVE ASSISTANCE TO OTHERS, IN THE NAME OF JESUS.

MANY CHURCHES ALSO HAVE ON GOING OR SPECIAL OFFERINGS FOR NEEDS-LOCALLY, NATIONALLY, AND GLOBALLY, AS WELL AS OTHER TYPES OF MISSION FUNDS.

I READ ABOUT ONE CHURCH THAT PUT MR. ROGERS' WORDS ON A LARGE JAR AND PEOPLE PUT IN MONEY WHENEVER THEY FELT GRATEFUL TO GOD.

THE MONEY WAS THEN GIVEN TO A LOCAL MISSION IN THE AREA WHERE THE CHURCH WAS LOCATED.

A FORMER PARISH I PASTORED ASKED PEOPLE TO PUT SPARE CHANGE IN A SPECIAL OFFERING PLATE, AND EACH MONTH OR TWO IT WOULD BE GIVEN TO A REGIONAL OR NATIONAL CHURCH MISSION- OR TO A LOCAL NEED.

BUT LET US NOT MAKE THE MISTAKE OF THINKING SHOWING GRATITUDE TO GOD IS JUST ABOUT GIVING MONEY OR THINGS.

YEARS AGO I ATTENDED A CONFERENCE WHERE A PASTOR SHARED A STORY ABOUT ANOTHER WAY WE SHOW GRATITUDE TO GOD.

WHEN HE CONDUCTED HIS FIRST WORSHIP SERVICE AT A CHURCH TO WHICH HE HAD BEEN CALLED, ONE MAN WHO GREETED HIM AFTER WORSHIP, OFFERED HIM A CHALLENGE.

HE WELCOMED HIM AS THE NEW PASTOR, BUT THEN SAID NOT TO WORRY IF HE DOES NOT SEE HIM MUCH IN WORSHIP, SINCE HE HAS OTHER THINGS TO DO MOST SUNDAYS.

THEN HE ADDED, “BUT DON'T WORRY, I'LL SEND MY CHECK EVERY MONTH.”

THE MAN REPEATED THAT STATEMENT WHENEVER HE SAW HIS PASTOR IN THE COMMUNITY, OR ON THE RARE OCCASION HE ATTENDED WORSHIP.

THEN, AFTER A FEW FAILED ATTEMPTS, THE PASTOR WAS FINALLY ABLE TO ARRANGE A TIME TO MEET WITH THE MAN, AND THEY DID SO ON THE GOLF COURSE.

WHEN THE GAME WAS OVER, THE PASTOR THANKED THE OTHER MAN FOR AN ENJOYABLE TIME, AND THEN ASKED A QUESTION.

HE SAID TO THE PARISHIONER, THAT IF HE HAD HEARD THE MAN CORRECTLY, HE SAID GOD HAS BLESSED HIM IN MANY WAYS.

THE PASTOR WAS ALSO TOLD THAT THE MAN WAS VERY GRATEFUL FOR WHAT THE LORD HAS DONE FOR HIM AND HIS FAMILY.

BUT, THEN THE PASTOR ASKED IF HE HAD HEARD RIGHT, THAT THE MAN'S ONLY RESPONSE TO GOD FOR ALL HIS BLESSINGS IS: "I'LL SEND YOU A CHECK EACH MONTH?"

THEN HIS PASTOR ADDED THAT GOD IS NOT INTERESTED IN HIS MONEY, IT IS THE MAN HIMSELF GOD LOVES AND SEEKS.

TRULY, GOD DOES WELCOME OUR EXPRESSIONS, PRAYERS, AND SONGS OF THANKS, AS WELL AS OUR OFFERINGS TO THE CHURCH, TO MISSIONS, AND TO OTHER WORTHY CAUSES.

BUT LET US NEVER FORGET WHAT THE LORD DESIRES MOST OF ALL FROM US IS OUR HEARTS AND LIVES.

REMEMBER, JESUS DID NOT COME TO DIE FOR OUR MONEY OR OUR OTHER OFFERINGS.

INSTEAD HE CAME TO SAVE US FROM SIN AND BRING US INTO GOD'S FAMILY AND KINGDOM.

IT IS A SINCERE AND GROWING RELATIONSHIP WITH HIMSELF THAT GOD DESIRE FROM US.

THIS IS ONE REASON WHY GIVING OUR THANKS AND PRAISE TO THE LORD IS SO IMPORTANT AND VALUABLE.

TRUE THANKSGIVING, HOWEVER, INVOLVES MORE THAN OFFERING EXPRESSIONS OR ACTS OF GRATITUDE ON CERTAIN DAYS, OR TIMES OF THE YEAR.

IT INCLUDES LIVING IN WAYS THAT DEMONSTRATES OUR GRATITUDE FOR OUR SALVATION AND OTHER BLESSINGS.

COLOSSIANS CHAPTER THREE IS ONE OF THE MANY PLACES IN SCRIPTURE THAT OFFERS US INSTRUCTION ON HOW TO LIVE THANKFULLY- AND NOT JUST GIVE THANKFULLY.

THANKFUL LIVING FIRST NECESSITATES GIVING UP HABITS OR OTHER THINGS THAT WE KNOW ARE DISPLEASEING TO GOD. DOING SO IS ONE WAY WE LOVE GOD, WHO FIRST LOVED US.

NEXT, THANKS-LIVING IS OFFERED TO GOD IN THE WAYS WE LOVE AND TREAT OTHERS.

THE APOSTLE PAUL DESCRIBES THE KIND OF ACTIONS THAT DISPLAY OUR GRATITUDE TO CHRIST, AS WELL AS OUR LOVE.

CHRISTIANS ARE CALLED TO DRESS OUR LIVES WITH THE TRAPPINGS OF THANKSGIVING FOUND IN: COMPASSION, KINDNESS, HUMILITY, MEEKNESS, AND PATIENCE.

OF ALL THOSE TRAITS LISTED IN THE EPISTLE READING, IT SEEMS THAT THE ONE WE NEED THE MOST IN OUR NATION TODAY IS THAT OF KINDNESS TOWARDS ONE ANOTHER.

THIS EVEN MEANS KINDNESS TOWARDS THOSE WITH WHOM WE DISAGREE POLITICALLY AND SOCIALLY.

THIS ALSO MEANS SHOWING KINDNESS AND FORGIVENESS TOWARDS THOSE WHO UPSET US BECAUSE THEY WEAR AND INSIST WE WEAR MASKS OR REFUSE TO WEAR THEM.

WE NEED TO ALSO BE KIND, FORGIVING, HUMBLE, MEEK, AND PATIENT WITH ONE ANOTHER WHEN IT COMES TO THE ISSUE OF BEING VACCINATED AGAINST COVID-19, OR NOT BEING VACCINATED.

HERE AND NOW IN THE MIDST OF THE STRESS OF ALL WE HAVE BEEN THROUGH IN 2020 AND 2021- CHRISTIANS ARE CALLED TO PUT OUR THANKFULNESS TO GOD INTO PRACTICE.

THIS CAN BE HARD TO DO AMONG THOSE WITH STRONG FEELINGS WHO ENCOUNTER OTHERS WHO- STRONGLY FEEL DIFFERENTLY.

BUT PERHAPS THIS WOULD BE EASIER FOR CHRISTIANS TO DO IF WE REMEMBER SHOWING KINDNESS IS ONE WAY WE LIVE OUT OUR GRATITUDE TO GOD.

CONVERSELY, WHEN WE FAIL TO BE KIND, COMPASSIONATE, HUMBLE, MEEK, OR PATIENT, WE ARE ALSO ACTING UNGRATEFULLY TOWARDS GOD.

THE SAME IS TRUE WITH THE BIBLE'S CALL FOR US TO RECONCILE WITH OTHERS AND BE FORGIVING TO EACH OTHER.

THESE ARE ALL THE WAYS WE ALLOW THE LOVE AND PEACE OF CHRIST TO RULE IN OUR HEARTS, AND FLOW FROM OUR LIVES TO OTHERS.

THESE ARE ALSO WAYS WE LIVE OUT OUR THANKSGIVING TO THE LORD FOR ALL HIS BOUNTY AND BLESSINGS, ESPECIALLY FOR SALVATION THROUGH CHRIST JESUS, OUR LORD.

STILL, IF WE ARE HONEST WE MUST ADMIT TO GOD AND OURSELVES THAT WHEN WE ARE FEELING- ANGRY, STRESSED, FRUSTRATED, OR GRIEVING LIVING THANKFULLY CAN BE HARDER.

LET US BE GRATEFUL, THEREFORE, THAT JESUS KNOWS AND UNDERSTANDS OUR HUMAN WEAKNESS AND LOVES US STILL.

AND IT IS OUT OF HIS LOVE FOR US THAT OUR SAVIOR CONTINUES TO CALL US TO LIVE OUT OUR GRATITUDE TO GOD-THROUGH SINCERE REPENTANCE, AND TRYING TO BE MORE FAITHFUL AND GRATEFUL AS WE FOLLOW HIM.

I'D LIKE TO CLOSE NOW WITH THE WORDS FOUND ON A THANKSGIVING CARD I RECEIVED, WHICH OFFERS BOTH A REASON TO LIVE THANKFULLY AND A BENEDICTION.

“THIS THANKSGIVING, MAY THE BEST OF ALL GOD’S RICHES- MERCY, GRACE, AND LOVE - FILL YOUR HEART TO OVERFLOWING.

AND MAY THE BLESSING OF ALL YOU GIVE TO OTHERS RETURN TO YOU AGAIN AND AGAIN.” AMEN