

SERMON
“Thanks for Nothing”
Ephesians 1:15-23
Sunday, November 21, 2021

Thanksgiving was only five days away. The Sunday school teacher wanted to have her preschoolers playfully correct some wrong ideas about the upcoming holiday. So she began: “Let’s see, Thanksgiving. That’s the day when we think about the stuff we have and how we want more than anyone else has and how we don’t care about anyone but ourselves and”

“No!” the kids started to yell. “N-o-o!”

Then one little guy announced, “That’s not Thanksgiving. That’s Christmas!”

It’s Thanksgiving week.

It’s time for us to count our blessings.

If you have food in the refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof overhead and a place to sleep ... you are richer than 75 percent of this world of ours.

If you have money in the bank, cash in your wallet and spare change in a dish someplace ... you are among the top 8 percent of the Earth’s wealthiest people.

If you woke up this morning with more health than illness ... you are more fortunate than the million who will not survive this week.

If you have never experienced the danger of battle, the loneliness of imprisonment, the agony of torture or the pangs of starvation ... you are ahead of 500 million people in the world.

If you can attend this worship service, or any other religion-related meeting, without fear of harassment, arrest, torture or death ... you are fortunate. Billions of people in the world cannot.

It’s not hard for us to count our blessings, is it? Most of us could quickly and easily jot down a rather lengthy list, including thanks for family, for friends, for food, for clothing, for cars, for a home, for a job, for health, for freedom, for opportunity, and so forth.

Homiletics wonders that if we did not have stuff to count would we still be able to be thankful. I am reminded of the woman who called the Butterball Turkey Hot Line wanting to know if it was safe to defrost and cook a Butterball turkey, she’d had in her freezer for 26 years.

The answer came back that, provided the turkey had been properly wrapped and continuously frozen at a low-enough temperature, it was technically safe to eat — but that, sadly, its quality would not be good.

“That’s what we thought,” the woman replied. “We’ll give it to the church.”

In our scripture passage for this morning, the Apostle Paul encourages us to give thanks for nothing. In fact, he offers us the example of his own thanksgiving for nothing at all - not one physical, material, tangible thing.

Instead, Paul gives constant thanks for things which are not things: Faith in the Lord Jesus, love toward the saints or as the NIV says, “all of God’s people”, a spirit of wisdom and revelation, the riches of God’s glorious inheritance and the immeasurable greatness of God’s power. Homiletics says of these blessings; *“none can be seen, touched, purchased or possessed - like food, clothing, cars, boats or homes. And yet, they are the very greatest gifts we could ever receive.”*

In 1645, during the Thirty Years War, there was a Lutheran pastor named Martin Rinkart who lived in Eilenberg, Germany. Eilenberg, under siege and surrounded by the Swedes, had not only lost 800 of its homes to fire, its people suffered from starvation and the plague. I am told that in that year the pastors within the walls of that village were burying 12 people a day. Pretty soon the pastors themselves started to die and Martin Rinkart was the only pastor left.

By 1647 he was conducting 50 funerals a day...

Can you imagine that?

Fifty funerals a day.

He buried over 5,000 people that year, including his own wife.

When the war ended a year later in 1648, he sat down and penned the following words:

*“Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices;
Who from our mothers’ arms has blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.”*

Martin Rinchart, I believe, best captures what Paul’s words to the Ephesians is all about. Even when we have nothing to be thankful about, we still have much to be thankful for.

This approach to Thanksgiving runs counter to conventional wisdom, and it refuses to fall into step with the swarm of shoppers that will surge into shopping malls this Friday to begin the Christmas buying binge. Paul doesn't give thanks for gold jewelry, cell phones, leather jackets, personal care products, computer games or the latest version of PlayStation. He refuses to focus his gaze on the things that can be seen, because he knows that these things are temporary.

Helen Keller once said that *“the best and most beautiful things cannot be seen or even touched; they must be felt with the heart.”*

Like Keller, Paul insists that what really matters in life are those things that are invisible to the eye but can be felt with the heart. When he counts his blessings, he lists absolutely nothing we can buy, and nothing we can own - only faith, love, a spirit of wisdom, a spirit of revelation, God's inheritance, God's power. None of these is a "thing," in a material sense. But whether we are rich or poor, homeowners or homeless, working or unemployed, we have access to an amazing set of essential, eternal, unseen treasures.

This Thanksgiving as we sit down to count our blessings let us remember to be thankful for the unseen treasures.