

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, we have so much. Compared to so many of our brothers and sisters around the world, we have great bounties with warm homes, food on the table, and loving people around us that care and seek our goodness. We do not all have the same blessings, but we have enough. When we truly look, God, we see we have riches beyond realization. In the midst of bounty, we also have issues that trouble our hearts. For all those subjects that were brought up in our presence here, God, for all those things joyful and for all those things troublesome, we give them to you. We ask you to lead as you have always done and speak to us how we can be your hands and feet for those who do not experience bounty.

Holy God, we seek to be mindful and thankful. We get the impression that we are to wrap Thanksgiving into a day, maybe a month, and then proceed with our lives right after that, all the time seeking more of all kinds of things. You call us to recognize there is a different “more” that we should be wanting, and it has nothing to do with what will make our lives more convenient. Allow us to seek the “more” that true thankfulness engenders, more compassion, more kindness, more humility, more meekness, more patience. Help us foster these in the limited time we have to be your children on this earth, for time is indeed precious. We pray all these things in the name of the one we are most thankful for, our Lord, Savior, and teacher of all thankfulness, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray and live together...

## SERMON

This is finally the month of November. I confess that it is probably one of my favorite months of the year, and with good reason. When we think about November, what do we think about the most? Yes, my wife is thinking about anything pumpkin again. But

seriously, we think of the holiday of Thanksgiving, but that holiday can get twisted from time to time. Let me give you an example from my own life. When I was growing up, my family always gave me and my sister gifts when we got together for the Thanksgiving holiday since both of our birthdays fell close to Thanksgiving. Being a young fellow who was learning what all these holidays so close together meant, I always thought that we shared Thanksgiving gifts. Then I started asking myself, well, I get these Thanksgiving gifts; why doesn't anyone ever get me any birthday gifts? I decided to ask my mom that one day, and she told me, no, no one shares Thanksgiving gifts, but we do give you gifts for your birthday. Funny how I couldn't be thankful for my Thanksgiving gifts; I thought that I needed more, so I complained. However, when my awareness of what I did have peaked, I came to be thankful of my family that gave me birthday gifts, even if they happened to coincide with Thanksgiving. Yes, I was a child who was still understanding what all these things meant, but even in the midst of Thanksgiving, I had a hard time being thankful. It's not just a Jeff problem; I think many of us suffer from the same thing.

This month is the time of Thanksgiving, but we also have our own misperceptions. It can often seem confined. Don't think of this month as the only month to celebrate Thanksgiving. It's a lifestyle as Christian people. We are called to be joyous people that live in that mentality, November and beyond. But how do we live that way? How do we foster that mindset all the time when it is much easier to do on one day with a full belly of turkey, mashed potatoes, and an afternoon full of football? How do we foster that mindset when we are in the midst of life just being overall negative? First of all, let me say foremost that we don't go out shopping on Thanksgiving night; that kinda really goes against the mentality of the whole thing. But let's explore that more deeply together this month, for

thanksgiving doesn't just come to us. Today, we want to especially understand how we look at the world. Let's look at first at the two main parts of thankfulness, then we can find one more component that will allow us to see how to be ongoing people of thankfulness when thankfulness can grow to be stale.

What are the first ideas you hear with "thankfulness?" I decided to do an Internet search simply on the word "thankfulness," and the first result I pulled up was a dictionary definition. It fell exactly in line with how I defined it. I believe the first part of Thanksgiving is recognizing what we have. So, we must ask ourselves: what do we have? That's probably a harder question than it might appear. We don't usually take stock of what is in our lives until we lose something. It can be a part of your health, it can be a possession, it can be another person in your life. True Thanksgiving begins when we recognize what we have when we have it, when we can still appreciate it. Let's take this specifically in the moment. Look around you. Each person here cares about this church. We have a community. We have a place to glorify our Creator, to be recharged and prepare for the next week. We have a place where we can hear, appreciate, and sing good music, even the hymns we aren't always familiar with. We look around and see abundance when we are all too easily taught to look at everything around us in terms of deficit.

But that's not the only thing. Thankfulness is fostered not only with an awareness of what we have. I can think of many things I have, some of which I have no semblance of thankfulness for. I have student debt, and while I'm thankful for my education, the debt does not make me happy. In fact, I try not to think about it, lest I become depressed. No, there is something else we need to have. What separates my education and my debt? It is what I think about it! The other part of thankfulness is wanting and loving what we have.

According to the Free Dictionary, “thankfulness” is defined as “aware and appreciative of a benefit.” We decide that what we have is enough, and we appreciate what that enough is. When we don’t live this, then we want more, and we are not truly thankful. That puts a new spin on things, doesn’t it?

Consider something like a collection. A collection sparks desire to consistently collect more. Throughout my life, I have collected sports cards. Sometimes I’ll be more interested in a player; sometimes it’s about collecting a complete set. I’ll collect one full set; what’s up next? The focus then becomes the next set. But does it have to be that way? Does the focus of building a collection need to be acquiring the next part and then the next one? And then the next one? I don’t believe so. Maybe the task of building collections is about knowing what I have, appreciating it, and enjoying the outlook of finding the next piece instead of looking at the collection in terms of deficit. Collecting can become more haunting about what we don’t have instead of what we have, and when that’s the case, then it’s a burden instead of a joy. Just like life can be when we do not live it with thankfulness.

Indeed, the great enemy is the scourge of “more, more, more!” and the Apostle Paul wrote a different prescription. In a world that cries for more, we see the ingredients that will build us up as Christian people. This is one of the ways that Paul crafts the necessities of the Christian life to the Colossian church. We see the things we should be crying for more, for they craft the good and faithful life. But what is the word and sentiment that repeats over and over? Thankful. In all these parts of the Christian life, thankfulness is the most articulated. But I still feel there is something missing. There is an almost...urgency to thankfulness that we’re not touching upon.

How do we maintain a thankful outlook? We take a good look at who we are and what life is all about. The passage from Ecclesiastes puts it rather bluntly. Sooner or later, we will all pass beyond, but as Christian people, there should be greater meaning in that than death. We talked at Iliff about a concept called finitude. Finitude simply means that in our lives, there is a definable beginning and a definable end as God created us to have. We often do not grapple with that, but when we think about it truly and deeply, we realize that our lives have more meaning when we appreciate that it will have an end. "Go," the teacher says, "Eat your bread with enjoyment and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has long ago approved of what you do." Live life to the fullest while we can, for, indeed, sometimes the unexpected come upon us all. Thankfulness shines on things more fully when we recognize there is an end; the end defines the middle more clearly. The recent shooting at Los Angeles International brings it all back to stark reality: we do not know how long we will be on this earth. We do not know how long we have to spend time with those around us, so every day is a new opportunity to look at this and be joyful and thankful. When we seek God, trust in God, and know that God has placed us here on this earth for a limited time, we will be amazed how the world looks. We learn how to keep things in perspective, but I'm not going to get ahead of myself. That is the topic we will discuss next week. I know my sermon series will have an ending, so I need to focus on the middle having meaning.

When you think about it, thankfulness affects outlook, and outlook affects thankfulness. Sounds like the old argument, "Which came first? The chicken or the egg?" Indeed, that may be the case. But we are rooted in God, and when we're truly rooted in God, we'll see the effects. We recognize and sanctify that we have an ending to our lives

and appreciate the meaning of life in between. Our outlook becomes about hopefulness, life in the presence of death, and we see our daily life through a thankful lens. On the other hand, daily life is daily life; sometimes it is inconvenient, and we will be down from time to time. It's natural not to be happy all the time, but this hopefulness in God is rooted throughout all the negative times of life. We won't always be happy, but we will be joyful throughout it all.

Thankfulness. It's an awareness of what we have. It's wanting what we have. And we must also recognize the limited time in which we have the blessings in which we are trusted. It comes together when we bring in the outlook of who we are, who we serve, and how long we are called to serve. We can easily be thankful in the moment, but it goes beyond that to a lifestyle and a mentality in which we foster qualities that will be beneficial to our futures. Thankfulness has many parts; we're just beginning. Next week we will go to the next place, and that is how we can better foster thankfulness when we keep everything in perspective. And so, with an outlook that recognizes what we have and that we can appreciate what we already do have while recognizing our limited time, thanks be to God because God truly loves us and wants to walk with us everyday! Amen and Amen.