

Giver of Faith and Thanks

Genesis 22:1-14, Matthew 26:6-13

"Daddy, I want to ask a question," said Bobby after his first day in Sunday school.

"Yes, Bobby, what is it?"

"The teacher was reading the Bible to us - all about the children of Israel building the temple, the children of Israel crossing the Red Sea, the children of Israel making sacrifices. Didn't the grown-ups do anything?"

You and I are gathered here as the Children of God to celebrate, and to give thanks to God.

In Longmont, Colorado is the Longmont Turkey Factory, a name-valued company. Before Thanksgiving weekends, for a long time, the company has presented a very good size turkey to every worker as a gift. As Thanksgiving season approached one year, one of the workers approached a manager who had worked there a long time, and asked,

"This year, is this company planning to give us a Longmont turkey for Thanksgiving?"

"Of course, giving a turkey to employees for Thanksgiving is the company's tradition." he answered. And then the worker asked again.

"How long can this Longmont Turkey be preserved in refrigerator? For ten year?"

"I have a nine year old Longmont turkey in my refrigerator. Is it still edible?"

"Of course, it can be preserved for more than ten years in a proper degree freezer. And, if your turkey has been kept in a proper freezer, at a proper degree, it is still edible. But the taste may not be as fresh as a new one." the manager replied again.

"That's what I thought" the worker added.

"If it is edible, I will bring it to church for Thanksgiving dinner!" the worker murmured.

Among the people, the church is counted on as the last place for a Thanksgiving celebration. Now days, Thanksgiving generally is considered secular, or at least nonsectarian, and is not based on any specific religious canon or dogma. Though the holiday's origins can be traced to harvest festivals that have been celebrated in many cultures since ancient times, the American holiday has religious undertones related to the deliverance of the English settlers by Native Americans, after the brutal first winter in Plymouth, Massachusetts.

Though the legacy of the American spirit began with the spirit of Thanksgiving, this spirit of Thanksgiving has spread all over the churches of the world.

Thanksgiving, celebrated on the third Thursday of November, started in America and has spread all over the world as a pivotal event in Christian history, as a big celebration day of the church calendar. Even in Korea, which has nothing to do with the historical event of America, has celebrated this event for a long time, from the beginning of the Korean church. The celebration of Thanksgiving in America is a big milestone of Christian history around the world.

Today we are celebrating Thanks-giving Sunday. Reflecting on Thanksgiving Day, I have been a little bit worrisome about it. This is because Thanksgiving is now considered more secular rather than religious.

I traveled to Italy a few years ago, and found awesome cathedrals, architecture, art and music influenced by Christianity. The tremendous influence of Christianity which produced the arts, music and architecture no longer was there in Italy. Now, most of churches and cathedrals were museums, not for the believers but for the tourists. Those churches are no longer worship places. There was historical evidence of Holy Christianity, but no spirit of the Holy in those places. As Apostle Paul noted, "There is form of piety but no power of it."

Without renewal of spirit, the once spirited Thanksgiving of America is losing its power. This is what has me a little bit of worried about, considering the customized Thanksgiving observed widely in America today. The spirit of Thanksgiving is the power of Americanism. The spirit of Thanksgiving was deeply rooted in the trust in God.

My memorable Thanksgiving Day was about forty five years ago. At that time, our family was so poor that we couldn't think about meat on our meal table. Beef, especially, was so expensive for our family, a household of five at that time, even a single meal with beef soup was out of our reach. At that time my family's main income source was from my sister, Ura, who worked as a typist at a US Army base in Inchon in Korea.

It was the eve of Thanksgiving Day on which my sister Ura got something of a bonus from her work. She thought many things about how to use her bonus. She decided to use the bonus to purchase some beef for the family's Thanksgiving Dinner. With the extra money she had received, she bought a pack of beef. She was so happy to please her family by having a special dinner for Thanksgiving.

To get to and from work, she walked an hour each day. On her way home from work this day, she met a family, homeless, who had nothing to eat, and only a shelter to sleep in on the corner of a small bank of a rice field. They were setting up their tent and covering it with bags of straws in the cold of winter. She had almost passed the scene of the family when she felt so sad about the family that she returned to them. Without rethinking about her own family, she gave them the whole pack of beef, which she bought for her own family. Singing a song of joy, she returned home and told us her story at the dinner table of a normal supper. And then, we slept in the night soundly. No one of my family complained about what she decided. That was a memorable Thanksgiving eve and the happiest night for our family.

In the "Greatest Thing in the World," Henry Drummond said, "Half the world is on the wrong scent in the pursuit of happiness. They think it consists in having and getting and in being served by others (when actually the reverse is true); real happiness consists in sharing and in giving and in serving others." The humble-minded know that- and they commit their lives to that.

We read two scripture readings this morning; Genesis 22 and Matthew 26. These two scripture readings gave us fascinating pictures in our imagination. Those two scriptures are the most magnificent and powerful stories in the Bible. One is the story of Abraham in which Abraham was asked to offer his son, Isaac, as a burnt offering, which Abraham tried to do. What an absurd attempt that was!

The story of Abraham holds an important theological message. It holds the message of sacrificial offering. Its image refers to us the message that God sent us his only Son for a sacrificial offering. It shows us how hard it was for Abraham to offer his son for a sacrificial, a burnt offering. The God who tested Abraham's faith to offer his son, Isaac, for a burnt offering was the God who actually accomplished what he had asked Abraham to do. That is the amazing grace of God. Our thanksgiving to God is not because He offers us visible, abundance of blessing, but because of what He already offered us: His Son offered to us for a significant life, recovering new life from the destructive life we often live.

The other story from Matthew 26 is the story of a lady who poured out a very expensive bottle of perfume, extravagantly, for a single service on the head of Jesus. These stories sometimes give us discouragement rather than encouragement when we find that our own lives as are far from these examples of faith in these stories. The actions of the woman in this story, for example, may seem to us blind and unrealistic.

But this seemingly blind eye of the woman, which seems not to take into account the needs of tomorrow, has been accepted as an act of faith by God. These acts of extravagant devotion, the acts of Abraham and the acts of the woman, seem to us not ordinary acts for ordinary people like us, but also acts of extraordinary blessing by God. Their blindness to what seem to be practical consequences was the sight of faith in God.

There are mystics, consecrations, miracles and healings we can not understand, but God knows and is pleased where the expensive, extravagant oil offered to God is offered freely and gratefully. And, this expensive, extravagant oil is life—our very lives are what should be offered extravagantly to God.

A long time ago in a church in Korea, there was a custodian who worked at his church very sacrificially, even though his salary there was very minimal. He woke up at 4:30 a.m. to ring a bell in the tower to announce the time of early prayer to the neighbors every day. He cleaned the church inside and out with a mop and broom. He fixed everything needed in the church. He stoked the stove to warm the sanctuary on Sunday mornings, evenings and Wednesday evenings in the winter. He worked the gardens on the boundary of the church in the spring and summer. He worked at the church all the time with joy. But the church offered him for his living only one room with a kitchen, and five hundred dollars a month. It was not enough for his family of four to live on that income. But, he was always thankful for his work at the church.

On a Thanksgiving Sunday, his warm heart decided to offer his whole month's salary to the offering plate. After service the treasurer reported to the pastor that he found that

unusual gift from the church custodian; he put his whole month salary in the offering plate.

The pastor called all the leadership of the church and discussed the custodian's offering. Someone said, "We should return his offering to him, because he must be out of his mind." Other said, "We should receive half of his offering and return the other half to him" But pastor said, "Offering is offering to God. We can not return his offering to him" We have no right to do so. But as the members of the church we should consider his family living." "I will suggest that we take turns to invite his family for dinner for the month." And he added "If there any one of you who is not able to invite him for dinner, bring food to them for a meal." Everybody agreed to that decision. For a month the custodian and his family were invited by the parishioners. That was the best food they had had for the whole month.

There is risk in trusting in God. All through the Bible, we see it. The great people of faith were people who trusted God and took a risk. They went out into the unknown, confident that God would go with them and see them through. Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Ruth, David, Mary, Paul, and many, many others like them trusted God and took the risk.

A Middle East chieftain tells the story about a spy who was captured and then sentenced to death by a general in the Persian army. This Persian general had a strange custom. He would condemn criminals to a choice between the firing squad and the big black door. As the moment for execution drew near, the spy was brought before the Persian general, who asked, "What will it be: the firing squad or the big, black door?" the condemned spy hesitated for a long time. It was a difficult decision, but eventually he chose the firing squad. Moments later, shots rang out, confirming the execution. The general turned to his assistant and said, "Isn't that something? They always prefer the known way to the unknown. It is so characteristic of people to be afraid of the undefined. Yet, we gave him a choice." "What lies beyond the big, black door?" asked the assistant, "Freedom," the general replied, "but over the years, only a very few have been brave enough to take it."

This story graphically reminds us of how difficult it is to take a risk, to make the leap of faith. There is always the temptation to stay with the familiar, to stay with the known, to stay with the comfortable.

Will you really step out and follow Christ? Will you give your life to him, heart and soul and mind and strength? Two of the main ingredients of faith are trust and risk.

God gave us two feet to walk. To step out and to follow Christ we should use both the right foot and the left foot; the foot of faith and the foot of thanksgiving. Unless using both the right foot and the left foot we can't go and move forward.

As a giver of faith and of thanks, Thanksgiving Sunday, we should remember, "What we are is God's gift to us; what we become is our gift to god.