

## “Thanksgiving Day Sermon - 2007”

Sermon November 22, 2007

The Reverend Elton O. Smith, Jr.

St. James' Episcopal Church, Potomac, MD

Thanksgiving Day! Think back: what are your special memories from Thanksgivings past? The Macy's Thanksgiving parade? Football games?

My first memories of Thanksgiving Day always go back to food. (I'll skip the 2d grade part of Thanksgiving when we made Indian costumes to remember who else was supposedly at the first Thanksgiving—I was always terrible in the sewing department.) I grew up during the Great Depression of the 1930's—that's history for you. I suppose we always had enough to eat, but Thanksgiving Day was special. We always were at my grandparents' house, with a bigger house, a bigger radio, a bigger choice of foods from a bigger table. My granddad got it right when he was asked if he wanted pumpkin or mincemeat pie for dessert and he would always answer...“YES!”

Bigger and better choices have come about for almost of us in the decades since then. When I was celebrating my first Thanksgiving Day in my first parish over fifty years ago I was reading John Kenneth Galbreath's new book “The Age of Affluence.” Americans were waking up to the post-war reality of the abundant good life. GE and others were trumpeting that “progress is our most important product.”

But half a century later we wonder about the progress we've made. We still have the tension of living in a world where we can spend untold billions on a war we don't understand very well, but still have enough left over for Presidential debates on how to provide medical coverage for over 40 million people. What a country! What a world!

And I don't think, with all of our material abundance, that we have begun to touch the spiritual hunger that men and women have always had, even back to the biblical festival of Sukkoth the “Feast of Booths” from the days of Moses. Yes, the history of Thanksgiving Day goes back that far. But perhaps it's worth noting that the booths, or tabernacles of the “Festival of Sukkoth” were **temporary huts**, erected to celebrate God's presence with his people on their way to the Promised Land--- which they never completely found. But “he's brought us this far” the old Gospel hymn reminds us, so in Deuteronomy's words this morning, “remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you!”

And so we celebrate today a Thanksgiving Day which is still a work in progress. The best thing I believe we can do this morning is to separate the word Thanks-giving--- and think of the day as one to cultivate, as they say, an “attitude of gratitude”, and then to link that attitude, that spirit, to the way we actually live, to couple “thanks” with “giving.”

Right after the Nicene Creed this morning we will say together what is called “A Litany of Thanksgiving”. The rubrics call for its “optional use” on Thanksgiving Day, but also note that it can be used any Sunday. I suggest that we might use it **ANY** day, to get us back into an “attitude of gratitude”.

I suspect that such an attitude is not easy for any of us. It's not easy, because we are so accustomed to taking our good lives for granted. It's not easy because we are never really satisfied; we are always yearning for **More**. When you realize you're thinking that way, it would be a good time to read again our Gospel for Thanksgiving as an antidote to our constant worry and anxiety not just for enough, but for MORE. It's not easy, because surveys tell us that some of the growing versions of Christianity actually portray a stern, judgmental God who has to be satisfied by "following his laws." Polls and surveys tell us that it is less than 40% of us who really believe in a gracious, benevolent, loving and giving God, a God who evokes from us an honest sentiment of gratitude. What's **your** image of God?

Yes, I think that the sentiment of a typical THANKSgiving Day has to find a new emphasis on the last part: **Giving**. Otherwise it is **just** a sentiment. Christianity is not just a "feel good" religion. It won't be if we remember where we came from, worshipping a homeless child who was born in a stable, and who gave his life, that we might live. It won't be, if we ponder the words of a Savior who always expressed in different ways that "if an individual wants to receive, then he or she must give. If you want to find your life, you must give it away."

It seems to me that the sentiments and traditions of Thanksgiving Day are only just sentiments and traditions, unless we read, mark, and inwardly digest the words of the Epistle this morning "be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves." We have to remember the words of St. James' we just heard "If any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, *"immediately forget what they were like."*

It's easy to forget if we succumb to what they call they use to call Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, a traditional beginning of the Christmas shopping hustle. Will we forget tomorrow our good intentions from our worship this morning, or will we still be coupling our Litany of Thanksgiving with the active response of GIVING so that others may live?

All of us, I think, need to ask ourselves in all of our personal relationships, are we *givers*, or *takers*? Here at St. James' we've been given an opportunity to go beyond that with our support of the Millennium Development Goals which we're reminded of every Sunday by the banners in back of us, and our prayers from the lectern. Not only has the parish committed on your behalf .7% of 1% of its budget to these goals, but just the parishioners who have reported tell us that \$24,000 has been given for these goals through your personal gifts.

What will it be for us? Each of us in our thanks for God's amazing abundance must decide how much we are willing to give back in response to the needs of others. *True* thanksgiving is only complete when it has in it a giving of ourselves. We tell the people of Iraq and Iran and Pakistan that we are thankful for our freedoms here. If that's really true we must find ways to show active concern for those who still wear the chains of poverty or prejudice or social injustice. What it comes down to is that the art of thanksgiving means ultimately: no real appreciation-- without reciprocation.

All of this is more than I thought about when Thanksgiving was just a big dinner, a parade and a football game. The football game is predictable, because Detroit cannot beat Green Bay this afternoon, and the Macy's parade will be over by the time we get home. That's OK, because I'm still trying to learn something more important, and hopefully you are too. On this Thanksgiving Day I pray that each of us will remember the true source of the blessings that keep coming to us. I pray that a sense of gratitude will fill our days so that we will transmit to our children and our children's children a world better than ours. I pray for **thanks=living**, and for a world filled with more possibilities because we have been **moved** by our gratitude to find ways to give, so that others may live.

I read somewhere words that are good reminders not just on Thanksgiving Day but every day, "Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks enough of changing one's self...BE the change you want to see in the world." You and your world will never be complete without that! AMEN.