

Thanksgiving Meditation-*Blessing and Gratitude*
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Emmanuel Friedens Church, Schenectady New York
November 23, 2014

Readings: Psalm 100
Mathew 25:31-46

25:31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.

25:32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,

25:33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

25:34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;

25:35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,

25:36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

25:37 Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?

25:38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?

25:39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

25:40 And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

25:41 Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels;

25:42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,

25:43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'

25:44 Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?'

25:45 Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'

25:46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

We have been blessed! So many things we are thankful for, so much we have received!

This is how the early church often worshiped: gathered at table. For them these meals, where men and women, servants and masters, people of different nations and cultures all gathered together on equal footing—this was their way of acting out what the Jesus movement was all about. They believed in a great banquet hosted by the messiah, where the old walls between us, the legacy of injustice: race, and class, nation and tribe, gender-- and we may add orientation!- all come tumbling down.

It is one thing to worship a God of judgment and wrath—and another thing to worship a God of mercy and love. The one place that Jesus the messiah got cranky was when folk failed to offer hospitality, and fell short of treating other human beings as children of the same loving God! But he insisted that any time we share bread with a stranger, particularly someone who is vulnerable, we share it with the messiah; any time we extend mercy to someone in bondage we extend mercy to Christ—and to the One who sent Christ.

As we eat together my mind goes back to all the times I have experienced hospitality. I cannot even count them all.

It began in my childhood home, with a mother who insisted on the open table—we had guests all the time from all over the world: Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Jain, and Christian, all kinds of things! From my mom I learned the best way to broaden our world is eating with someone who comes from a fundamentally different place. As we extended hospitality, we received more than we gave!

Then there have been so many times when I have been the guest and not the host. I lived for the better part of two years with a Catholic Worker family, when I was taking a break from seminary. The Cornells took me in as a guest for all that time, asking only that I help out with serving others from time to time. What a gift. A few years later there was the pre-wedding reception thrown for Lynn and me by the members of First Baptist Church of Pittsfield Mass. And there was the dinner the night before you voted to call me as your pastor.

At the heart of Christianity is the logic of the potluck meal. We all bring something to share, and there is enough, and more, an abundance. It is easier to love if we have tasted love, easier to be merciful if we have received mercy, easier to offer hospitality if we have received hospitality. As a church this is what we are all about.

I was driving this weekend; I went to visit Lynn. Looking over my shoulder toward Buffalo, I was mindful of snow! But as I drove my mind went back to a snowstorm some years ago—about 48 inches that time too. Nothing moved. On the third day, I looked out the window and realized that if there was an emergency there would be no way to respond—the plows had come through just once, on the cross street a hundred feet away, but nowhere near our driveway!

It was a beautiful morning. By 9 AM, I was bored. So I went out, and began to shovel a path from our driveway toward the corner, all alone. I shoveled, an upstate Don Quixote tilting with the elements. My neighbor the artist came out on his stoop. He looked at me, and said: “Whatcha doin?” I rested on my shovel and looked at him, and wasn’t sure what to say. “Well, got nothing better to do.” He looked at me for a minute. “Darn it” says he. “Whatcha wanna do that for? My

wife is gonna see you. I suppose now I am going to have to help you, do the same fool thing. Bad back or no bad back!”

We made the papers, the radio, I think maybe even the TV—we got one entire city block shoveled, mostly by hand. As we moved down the street, more and more people came out and started shoveling. Toward the end a sidewalk plow came through and did the sidewalk. We flagged him down, and asked if he might run that thing down the middle, just this once. “Can’t do that” he said. “Against the rules. If the street plow guys find out, I’ll be out of a job.” And took off. But ten minutes later he came flying through to clean up the last few feet and widen the path.... Rules or no.

Days later, I got a letter in the mail. It was from that neighbor—the artist. I don’t have it any more, but I remember the spirit of the words. “Dear Peter,” he wrote. “A few months ago, a bullet came through our wall, in a drive-by shooting. It dropped into our kitchen cabinet, and later, when we found it, we kind of gave up. We put our house on the market. Thank you for the other day. I remembered that sometimes it just takes one small act to bring out the good in people. I don’t know where else I could find a neighborhood as good as this one. We are staying. We took our house off the market.”

Friends, when we say “Stewardship” in the life of the Church it’s nothing more nor less than this—receiving and giving, all mixed together, redemption and grace piled up like so much snow soup in upstate New York. As a congregation today we face serious challenges—some of us might even be tempted to put the house on the market. Let us instead bring what we have, and receive what we need.

In a moment or two we will ask you to bring forward your pledge cards—but also take a moment to take a crack at the little yellow card, the one that asks you very personal questions! And then, as we sing, we invite you to bring it all to the table, along with the pledge for the coming year! We all will receive abundantly from these gifts shared. And whether it is grabbing a shovel or placing something in the plate, or teaching a child, my suspicion is that the grace we receive will be far greater than we can imagine. We've tasted this banquet before—come on, the feast continues. And there is a whole new course set for the sharing.