



“Table Blessing”

a sermon by

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Our Scripture this Thanksgiving eve comes from the book of Ephesians, chapter 1, verses 3-14. At first glance this scripture reveals a fairly comprehensive systematic theology and sounds a bit heavy, like a dogmatic as a summary of faith, but it was written by Paul as poetry hearkening back to the liturgy of the Psalms- a prayer of blessing thanking God for God's glory and intending to draw us closer in relationship to Christ. For this reason, I will read it a little slowly to allow more time for the sentiment of the words to resonate, rather than rushing through it and risking the text getting jumbled into obscurity. The Apostle Paul to the church in Ephesus- let these sentences soak in. Hear the Word of God:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure- that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.” Amen.

The table blessing at thanksgiving is never as simple a matter as it may seem. For many Americans Thanksgiving day will take on a special, spiritual significance and will truly warm hearts with the fellowship it invites, so the prayer offered at the meal will only be one of a continuum of events orchestrated to nurture the Spirit in our presence, to call us back to the blessing. For others, the blessing at the table serves as the bright spot of faith in a day reserved for purely secular pleasures of football, sleeping in late, and a hopefully happy gluttony. But regardless of who you are, who you are with or not with, on Thanksgiving day weather you sit before a stuffed Turkey or take-out Chinese, there is a pause, a sense of gravitas just before the meal that was so carefully prepared is vandalized- cranberries slathered over bird, gravy unleashed on stuffing. This is the day of Thanksgiving, and a prayer is appropriate. I find it interesting that hours of preparation and toil, reaching sometimes weeks in advance, for one brief moment, become secondary, accessories, if you will, to the true purpose of the day when this moment reserved for prayer arrives.

I will never forget the first time I was asked to offer the blessing at the Thanksgiving table. It seemed natural to everyone at the time. I was 17 years old and had announced in the months prior that I was called to Seminary. In a largely unchurched extended family who looked annually to my father to offer the blessing there was a collective sigh of relief and a sense of the bestowing of an honor when my aunt approached me and asked me to offer the blessing before the meal. “That would be such a nice thing and good practice at that, Katie. You can say whatever you

want, just be sure to not mention Jesus.” My cousin’s new husband was Jewish and joining the family for our feast for the first time. In hindsight, I think he would have been mortified by this request on his behalf, as one who has never asked anyone to sacrifice part of their faith to accommodate his own, but at the time, Jesus was not only relegated to the dark corners of our Thanksgiving blessing, he was oppressed altogether in an omission that was orchestrated out of ‘sensitivity’, and ended up leaving me, at least, feeling a peculiar emptiness inside- something deeper than if the turkey, or the parade, or the family even had been left out of the day. I didn’t thank God for Jesus, not at that table blessing, at least. Maybe it was the right thing to do- maybe it wasn’t. But my soul noticed the omission, and felt it.

Of course there are always those that go overboard with the prayer of thanksgiving in remembering Jesus. I cannot help but think of Maya Angelou’s comments about the preacher’s table blessing in her childhood home. After dropping in unannounced for dinner after church, she recalls, he would offer lengthy prayers recapping the history of God’s plan of salvation and the details of Christ’s crucifixion with all the zeal of a Sunday morning sermon while Maya and her siblings watched as her mothers perfectly timed potatoes cooled and syrupy gravy congealed, and by the time he offered his, ‘for this we give you thanks, O Lord. Amen’ the feast held no appeal to neither eye, nose, nor stomach and they collectively grieved their mother’s afternoon labors gone to waste on a now cold and unappealing spread.

So often our table blessing falls victim to the best intentions of such frustrated preachers as our own loved ones, and we experience our own zeal for the ceremony fading with each passing minute and stiffening marshmallow on the sweet potato pie. Whether your house is bursting at the seams with guests and children’s tables adorned with leaves that have been transformed from a common nuisance carried in the back door by the dog to a sacred purpose of colorful table décor, weather you are hopeful for a quiet dinner alone or perhaps for two or three, or if you are working the late shift or closing out the end of the month and hope you remember to pull your Tupperware out of the office fridge for dinner, when the time comes to offer thanks, what will flash through your mind on the list of things to offer up to God in thanksgiving? There is no right answer, no formula for offering thanks, but it is interesting to see what comes up in our hearts.

For me, at least, it seems that in these moments my mind is only capable of conjuring the same thing every year. My family. My friends. Safe home. Health while I have it. And, of course, Jesus. But with visions of sugar plums and presents in my own head I can’t help but sneak a few quiet prayers in there for the stuff. A new coat when others are so cold. Food when so many will go hungry. A house. Transportation. Leisure.

Invariably don’t our prayers turn to other matters too- prayers that Thanksgiving day is finally here or almost over. That certain family members were or were not able to attend the festivities. That Uncle Joe or Aunt Louise didn’t bring up the election or gay marriage or their pancreas. The Today Show recently interviewed immigrant children in Massachusetts, asking them what they were most thankful for. Clothes and American shopping malls were among those on the list and is it any wonder, with the unofficial subtitle of the holiday being the kickoff of the largest consumer event of the year- Those vital weeks of shopping before Christmas considered

‘Advent’ by some. Four weeks devoted to so many things we need that we forget we need God. Perhaps your prayers of Thanksgiving turn to prayers of endurance at the prospect of a holiday season without a loved one, or a family ritual that will be absent this year. Where will your mind turn in that moment reserved for prayer? What will linger in your throat and what will be spoken if you are asked to shoulder the table blessing?

As we as a nation seat ourselves around a million holiday meals this week the lectionary for today focuses our attention on the Apostle Paul as he stands up at the collective table of discipleship, clinks his glass with his fork, clears his throat, and shows us what the table blessing is all about. For in his blessing Paul’s mind is certainly filled with all the things that preoccupy and delight us now, the complexity of relationships, the grievance of his own thorn in his flesh, surely his mind was suppressing nagging details to attend to after penning his letter but it was also intoxicated with his experience of Jesus Christ and that transforming moment when he was knocked to the ground on a solitary Damascus road and his life was opened up to a vision of the depths of fullness and grace and salvation unlike any his secular heart had ever known. And so he connects us to our celebration on a deeper level, That level reserved for those who have a new understanding of God in Christ Jesus, cutting to the quick of the true reason for our ultimate thanksgiving with the efficiency and clarity of an attorney and the beauty of a poet, and the depth of insight of one who has glimpsed the face of Christ and has seen all his life, all that he has ever known about himself and the world, and God thrown into the radical perspective of boundless grace. And instead of counting material or temporal blessings, blessings that are to be counted for sure for they are blessings indeed, he counts spiritual ones. Spiritual blessings that neither moth nor rust nor age nor circumstance nor history past or squabbles to come can conquer.

Spiritual blessings that are easy to forget and difficult to articulate but blessings we nonetheless live in, are invited to feast upon, to delight our souls in. Blessings we have a hard time naming but are encouraged by Paul to cling to and celebrate- that strain of Spirit uniting us, that essence of joy of life in Christ that lives in us, that seal we bear on our hearts that distinguishes us among angels, spiritual blessings that were bestowed upon us in the beginning of time, by a God who loved us before this world -filled with the blessings our minds *can* comprehend -was even created. No wonder his blessing speaks to something in our souls, something we desire deeply to connect with each and every day, because it voices that which is revealed when the surface of our celebration is scratched, and our memory reawakened to the eternal truth of the reckless, Unabashed ferocity of the love of the divine for it’s creation. Thanks be to God, he exclaims, who offers us every spiritual blessing throughout all time, who chose us to be holy and blameless before him simply for the sake of his love. Thanks be to God who welcomes us as children into his family, adopts us into his household, that we might be sisters and brothers to his son. That we would be called blessed, forgiven of our debts, held blameless for our sin, and in their place adorned with the riches of God’s grace lavished upon us by an infinitely generous and humble king. Thanks be to God who reveals himself to us solely that we might delight in him and worship him, that we might rest in assurance that in Christ he has a plan for our future, for the fullness of all time so that we might find comfort, be drawn to God by his mercy, that we might bathe in his grace and refresh our spirits in his presence and all for the sake of his glory. Thanks be to God who makes us inheritors of a heavenly estate, who gives us the happy

mark of a chosen people, who have received the promise of the Spirit, Thanks be to God who gives us all good gifts so that we might live for the praise of God's glory. Though we might never voice these blessings over a thanksgiving meal they are the praises our souls utter each day we are alive, they are the table blessing offered by our Spirit with sighs too deep for words in those moments reserved for prayer and a million others... Be sure and enjoy that loaded moment of pause before the meal, when deep within all of us in places unseen there is the brief recognition that we were built for praise.

Celebrate those blessings of this world and the next, soak in the gift of a day reserved for reflection and gratitude and know that God does not require the eloquence of Paul at the table blessing, but a simple 'thank you' will do. And in the words of one wiser than I, "preserve everything in a pure, still heart, and let there be for every pulse a thanksgiving, and for every breath a song."¹ So that we might live for the praise of God's glory. Amen.

¹**Konrad von Gesner**