

“Recovering a Sense of Thanksgiving”

a sermon by

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Text: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair” (II Corinthians 4:8).

Thanksgiving is a season in which we are called to reflect on the meaning of our lives and the life of our nation. In 1789 George Washington, the President of the United States, declared the first National Day of National Thanksgiving. Decades later, in the midst of a bloody Civil War, Abraham Lincoln revived the practice of what is now an annual tradition of issuing a Presidential Proclamation of Thanksgiving. In that Proclamation, President Lincoln asked God, “to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purpose of the full employment of peace, harmony, tranquility, and union.”

Although it is difficult for me to acknowledge that so many years have passed, I remember an event that happened forty-four years ago today. On November 21, 1963 President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. Those of us who were alive then remember exactly where we were when the news came that the President had been shot. I was a student at Davidson College at the time. I remember playing basketball in the gym, when a student came in and told us that the President had been shot. At first we didn’t believe him, but soon the game dissolved and most of the students wandered aimlessly about, finding their way eventually to the fraternity houses or to other places where they could watch television. The death of President Kennedy in many ways was the beginning of a period of great division that characterized the 1960’s. There were other assassinations, including Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy. It brought about another series of events as well: the beginning of a drug culture, Watergate and Vietnam.

Today, we find ourselves divided in different ways than we did in the 1960’s. The war in Iraq has created a division within this country today. But it isn’t just the war in Iraq and Afghanistan that trouble us today; there are other things as well. Americans are worried about global warming and the crisis surrounding the high price of fossil fuel. They are worried about health care and the growing gap between rich and poor.

Yet, troubling as these issues may be, they are not the things that disturb me the most. What is most troubling to me is that I detect a sense of weariness in our national life today. Sometimes I wonder if we have lost the sense of faith and confidence in our ability to face the problems before us or whether we worry that the divisions between us will destroy us.

I.

The Apostle Paul, in writing to the church at Corinth, encourages them, “not to lose heart.” To be sure, there were many discouraging things at the church in Corinth. There were divisions in the church that centered on charismatic personalities. There was a group that was attracted to a brilliant orator by the name of Apollos. Others were focused around Jesus’ disciple, Peter. Still others swore their allegiance to “Paul,” while others were part of what Paul called the “Christ party.”

There were other dividing aspects as well. The Lord’s Supper had become a scandal. The rich were eating with other wealthy people and ignoring the poor, calling into question the very heart of the sacrament. There were also people speaking in “unknown tongues” and demonstrating other spiritual gifts that they were lording over other people.

There were more problems in the church as well. A man was sleeping with his stepmother (I Corinthians 5:1). And yet, in the midst of all of this discouragement, Paul sounds a note of hope. He reminds them that the “things that are seen” are transient, but that “the things that are unseen” are eternal.

So what are the elements of “confidence” and “hope” that need to be recovered today?

II.

One element that is badly needed is a recovery of the “common good.” One of the debates that occupied the attention of the founding fathers of this nation was the relationship between the self-interest of individuals and the common good of the entire nation. The basic ideas of the founders of this country was that individuals had the right to pursue their own self-interests, but that this had to be measured against the concept of a “civic virtue” or responsibility for the common good. Now this may have always been more of an idea than a reality. But today we see growing groups of individuals and groups fighting for their own self-interests and gain, without any regard for the goals or even the survival of the society as a whole.

Recently I came across a book by Ernest Gordon entitled *The War to End All Wars*. In this book, which is an autobiography, Gordon recounts his experience as a British Army officer captured by the Japanese during World War II. He was part of a work detail assigned to build the Burma-Siam railway. Each day Gordon joined a work detail of prisoners to build a track bed through low-lying swampland. If a prisoner appeared to lag, a Japanese guard would beat him to death or decapitate him. Many men simply dropped dead from exhaustion, malnutrition, and disease. Ultimately, 80,000 prisoners died.

Gordon could feel himself gradually wasting away from a combination of beriberi, worms, malaria, dysentery, typhoid, and diphtheria. Paralyzed and unable to eat, he asked to be

laid in the Death House, a place where prisoners were allowed to die in peace. But his friends had other plans for him. They carried his shriveled body on a stretcher from that contaminated place to a new bed of split bamboo.

As Gordon noted, the prison camp had become a laboratory for the survival of the fittest, each man for himself. Men lived like animals, and for a long time, hate was the main motivation to stay alive.

One day something happened in that camp that Gordon later referred to as “the miracle on the River Kwai.” One day a Japanese guard discovered that a shovel was missing with one of the work crews. When no one confessed, the guard cried out, “All die. All die” and raised his rifle to fire at the first man in the line. At that instant an enlisted man stepped forward and said, “I did it.” Enraged, the guard lifted his weapon high in the air and brought the rifle butt down on the soldier’s skull, killing him instantly. That night, when the shovels were inventoried again, it was discovered that a mistake had been made. There was not a missing shovel.

One of the prisoners remembered the verse, “Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

Gordon sensed that after that event the whole atmosphere of the camp changed. Prisoners began to look out for one another, and for the first time bread was shared. When the camp was finally liberated by the allied troops, the prisoners treated their sadistic guards with kindness and not revenge.

As for Gordon, his own life took an unexpected turn. He enrolled in Seminary and later became the Dean of the Chapel at Princeton University.

Long ago Jesus of Nazareth taught us that only the people willing to lose their lives will find them. But where are the statesmen? Where are our citizens? Where are those who start by thinking of themselves as part of a great republic, whose own interest—whether banking, industry, law, religion, or whatever—cannot succeed unless we succeed together.

III.

Then, too, rediscovering a spirit of thanksgiving also involves us in the recovery of a sense of toleration of the rights and beliefs of other people. Many of the people who came to the shores of this nation did so to rid themselves of the imposition of the state upon religion. That is a tradition for which we ought to be thankful and which we ought to pledge ourselves to maintain. Recently, the freedom of religion has been threatened by extreme groups of the right and left who have tried to impose their views on other people. These people often claim that there is only one position that Christians can take on such complex subjects as homosexuality, abortion, war.

As Christians, we believe that truth does exist. But our perception of the truth is colored by the fact that we are first of all sinners, and secondly that we are creatures and not the creator.

Today, we live in an increasingly pluralistic society where Christians are more and more likely to find themselves in the presence of other religions. To maintain one's own convictions without denigrating other people is one of the greatest tasks we face. Abraham Lincoln, perhaps the greatest theologian our nation has ever produced, once said, "Let us not say that God is on our side. Rather let us hope that in the end, we will be found on the side of God." Another American, Reinhold Niebuhr, once stated, "We must fight falsehood with our truth. But we must also fight the falsehood in our truth."

Central to the notion of tolerance is the realization that all of us are tied to one another and if one falls, all are in danger of failing.

Martin Niemoeller, a German pastor who was imprisoned by the Nazis during World War II, noted after his release the following:

"The Nazis came for the communists and I didn't speak up because I was not a communist. Then they came for the Jews and I did not speak up because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then, they came for the Catholics and I did not speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me...by that time there was no one to speak up for anyone."

IV.

Finally, if we are to recover a spirit of Thanksgiving, we are going to have to recover the notion of the providence of God. On this Thanksgiving Day it is appropriate to remember that the notion of providence was important to those who settled this country. They did not believe that it was a matter of chance they found themselves on the shores of this nation. Rather, they believe that the presence and power of God had made it possible for them to be there. As the New England historian Perry Miller once observed, "their errand was not a mere scouting expedition. It was an essential maneuver in the drama of Christendom."

Apart from the belief that "this is our father's world," one can easily despair about our future or the future of our planet. Some people look at the heart of the universe and see only blind chance and a cosmos being hurled through space without direction. As Christians, we believe that we have been created by God, redeemed by our Lord Jesus Christ, and that nothing can separate us from God's love.

Dean Rusk, who was the Secretary of State under President John Kennedy and President Lyndon Johnson, in his *Memoirs*, related the events of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. It was a crisis that found a young American President at odds with the Soviet Premier. American surveillance had discovered that nuclear missiles had been placed in Cuba, only 90 miles from our shore. The American President had ordered the missiles to be removed and had imposed an embargo on Cuba. Rusk remembers that as the Soviet warships were headed to Cuba, the nation was placed on red alert. It was the closest we have ever come to full out nuclear war. All of the missile silos in this country were readied and all of the B-52s were in the air.

During the crisis, Rusk noted that he continued to go back to a catechism question he had learned as a boy in a church in Georgia. What is man's chief end? What is human life about? Why are we here?"

I, for one, believe that God did not put us on this planet to destroy the air we breathe, or the water we drink, or for Muslims to destroy Christians, or Christians to destroy Muslims.

This is the kind of hope and confidence we need to recover. It is not confidence and hope built solely on our own inherent goodness, but it is confidence based on the power of a loving and sovereign God.

Amen.