



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., Rector

The Art of Giving Thanks

Sermon preached at the six o'clock service, November 24, 2021

Thanksgiving Eve

Joel 2:21-27; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Matthew 6:25-33

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

I'm so glad you all are here tonight because we've come together on the evening before the large dinners and the gatherings with family or friends to share in giving thanks to the God, who has blessed us with all that we have and all that we are. We think of ourselves as grateful people, but, given all that we have been blessed with, we probably don't offer our thanks enough. It is easy to neglect that great truth: All that we have and all that we are comes from God.

We tend to forget that *every* life is a blessing and a gift. Yes, the child born blind and the man fighting cancer. Yes, the paralyzed woman in a wheelchair on a New York side street, as well as the small girl struggling to survive in the Sudan. Every life, every single life—even *your* life in all of its imperfection and inadequacy—is a blessing and a gift.

Jesus said, "I tell you, do not worry about your life," but we don't really pay too much attention to that loving counsel. It often seems that we do little more than worry about our lives. We stress over our studies, our work, our relationships, our finances, our children, our parents. We worry about the past and we fret over the future. We, who have been given so much, are some of the most anxious people on the planet. So it becomes all the more important for us to stop and take a moment, to give thanks for all the blessings of this life. Jesus asks, "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" I think we all know the answer to his rhetorical question.

So, here's a little history from Wikipedia. Thanksgiving has been celebrated as a national holiday in the United States on and off since 1789, after Congress requested a proclamation by President George Washington. Later, in the midst of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a national day of "Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens," to be celebrated on the last Thursday in November. Lincoln had been prompted to make the proclamation because of a series of editorials written by Sarah Josepha Hale, who championed the idea of a national day of giving thanks.

Of course we all remember that "First Thanksgiving" celebrated by the Pilgrims after their first harvest in the New World in October of 1621. The feast was said to have lasted three days and was attended by 90 Native Americans and 53 Pilgrims. Squanto, a Patuxet Native American who resided with the Wampanoag tribe, taught the Pilgrims how to catch eel (No one ever thinks of *that* as a traditional Thanksgiving Day dish!) and taught them how to grow corn and squash. Squanto served as a translator for Pilgrims because

he had learned English after having been captured, taken to England, and sold as a slave. He found his way back to the colonies, helped, some say, by Catholic friars, and he served as the go-between between the Wampanoag tribe and the Pilgrims.ⁱ It's interesting that someone who had been so mistreated by the colonists would later play such a pivotal role in their survival. One can't help but wonder if the Pilgrims were appropriately thankful.

Jesus said, "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" We are all very aware of what we have done to build up our resources. We're aware of how hard we've worked and how much we have struggled. So it becomes easy to diminish God's involvement in all of our blessings.

Garry Trudeau, the creator and author of the comic strip *Doonesbury*, spoke at a college commencement and, in that address, he mentioned he was going through what he called a "season of gratitude." The Reverend Daniel Heischman writes, "Perhaps he was referring to the fact that his child was graduating from college that day. Or it may have to do with how often Trudeau uses this term *gratitude*." Heischman continues, "Seemingly a modest man, one of the few things that Trudeau mentions, in terms of his abilities, is his knack for keen observation, his ability to pay attention to the world around him. That paying attention and his frequent allusions to gratitude may just be related. To be in a season of gratitude is to be paying attention to what goes on around us."ⁱⁱ

Each day, countless acts of kindness are performed, numbering in the millions upon millions. Each day, one human being pays attention to the life of someone next to them living their life. And, in paying attention...

- They realize that the person next to them doesn't have enough to eat.
- They become aware of the fact that someone is cold.
- They notice that someone is struggling to make it through the day. This paying attention is the basis for compassion. This awareness of others and is a fundamental part of what makes us human.

To be in a season of gratitude is to be paying attention to what goes on around us.

So, what *is* going on around us? We are living our lives—yes, with some additional drama provided by the pandemic and all the ensuing economic ramifications.

- We struggle with a polarized political environment.
- We struggle with our fears regarding a deteriorating climate.
- We struggle with our own issues and concerns.

So, remind me again, why should we be thankful?

J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* and a man of great Christian faith, was sent a letter by his publisher's daughter, Camilla Unwin. She was asked as a part of a school project to ask Tolkien, "What is the purpose of life?" Tolkien took her question seriously and responded. In the letter he wrote, "So, it may be said that the chief purpose of life, for any one of us, is to increase, according to our capacity, our knowledge of God by all the means we have, and to be moved by it to praise and thanks."

To do as we say in the Gloria in Excelsis: *Laudamus te, benedicamus te, adoramus te, glorificamus te, gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam*. "We praise you, we call you holy, we worship you, we proclaim your glory, we thank you for the greatness of your splendour." Tolkien concluded his letter by writing, "This is much too long, and also much too short on such a question. With best wishes, J. R. R. Tolkienⁱⁱⁱ."

I don't know of a more complete short answer to the question, "What is the purpose of life?" than that. The chief purpose of life, for any one of us, is to increase, according to our capacity, our knowledge of God by all the means we have, and to be moved by it to praise and thanks.

The more we know about God, the more we think about God, the more we praise and worship God, the more we are thankful. "To be in a season of gratitude is to be paying attention to what goes on around us." And when we pay attention to what is going on around us, we become aware of all the ways God has blessed us. And, when we pay really close attention, we become ever more thankful—and much, much less anxious.

Happy Thanksgiving.

Amen.

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ⁱ *Wikipedia*, "Thanksgiving (United States)" & *allthatsinteresting.com*, "*Squanto, The True Story of the Native American Behind the First Thanksgiving*."

ⁱⁱ Copied. Source unknown.

ⁱⁱⁱ Copied. Source unknown.