

Rev. Dr. Rebecca L. Kiser
The Bedrock of Gratitude
Nov 21, 2021 Thanksgiving

Happy Thanksgiving! I hope you all have good plans for this Thanksgiving holiday. My children and I are doing a family Zoom to “eat together” rather like the Virtual Pot-lucks we did here during our Mission Study.

Thanksgiving feels rather odd to me this year, as there’s been so much myth-busting about Columbus and the pilgrims, and a recognition of how our white ancestors, descended from conquering peoples, came here and did it again with little regard for the humanity and prior claims of indigenous peoples. As I drive around going to the Y or medical appointments and what not, I see signs in people’s yards about keeping Columbus statues as well as taking down Columbus statues. With us having the Onondaga nation right here, and with our presbytery’s name of Cayuga-Syracuse, we are surrounded by reminders of the evil that can be done through ignorance or inattention; and how easy it is to just think of ourselves and those like us rather than seeing the bigger picture.

You all probably realize that I’m not super comfortable with celebrating national holidays in our churches - I don’t like to confuse God’s realm with the nation, or intermingle what is due God and what is due our country. That way is trouble. But our ancestors were evidently giving thanks to God for their survival in those early days, and a lot of the fighting had yet to happen. I can certainly celebrate giving thanks to God in any and every situation - for blessings, yes, and also just for what God has done for us, whatever kind of situation we find ourselves in.

For example, this covid pandemic that doesn’t seem to be going away...now in its second year and being extended with variants happening. I know we’d all dance for joy and give thanks to God if it all disappeared overnight and a total cure was found that worked world-wide; but that hasn’t happened. So someone might ask, why are we giving God thanks? People are still getting tragically ill and dying, here and around the world - the thing continues to spread, and change and spread more, affecting more people, people that we know and care for - neighbors, children even. How can we have Thanksgiving?

It’s a current example of the problem of evil - how can we give thanks when bad things are happening? Well, for one thing, if we only gave thanks when good things were happening, we’d rarely give thanks at all. Thinking that we’re thanking God for good things happening to us is a basic misunderstanding of gratefulness and thanksgiving in the first place. Yes, we may say “Thank God” that our test didn’t come out positive for covid, or cancer, or whatever - but our true thankfulness to God is for who God is and what God has done for us and for our salvation.

The bigger picture of thankfulness is shown in the prayer we do at the start of our communion ritual - the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, that long prayer before we partake of the bread and cup. Our more high church friends call communion The Eucharist - I'm sure we've heard friends call it that. Eucharist is the Greek word for Thanksgiving, and that great prayer is liturgically called the Eucharistic prayer. Basic to partaking in our communion is our thankfulness for Jesus' work on our behalf. That's why I chose the passage from John 18 to read this morning - Pontius Pilate is questioning Jesus about whether he is a king, or what kind of king.... Jesus begins by pointing out that the kingdom, or kingdom he speaks of is not an earthly one, not of this world - Jesus is talking spiritual realms here. Then he says, standing there chained and condemned, "for THIS I was born and for THIS I came into the world, to testify to the capital-T Truth." (He didn't say "capital -T Truth," that was my emphasis.)

THIS is the basis of our thankfulness, THIS is the bedrock of our gratitude. From the beginning of the creation God called good, God has acted for us and our salvation. In that Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, we give thanks for creation, for our own creation as well. We recognize our fallenness, and give thanks again for the way God has continually reached out to humanity through prophets and Laws and judges - and in the fullness of time, through being born among us in Jesus, who showed us and taught us and called us and even gives us new life.

For this we can give thanks despite what's going on outwardly. We can give thanks in the midst of a pandemic, and seek to apply all our human science and intelligence to alleviating the suffering going on in the world. We can give thanks, like people of faith before us have done, even if imprisoned. We can give thanks when there is plenty of food and when there is little; we can give thanks when we & our loved ones are well and when we or our loved ones are ill. We can give thanks to God even when court systems and governments do questionable things. Whether we like our current president or not has no impact on our gratitude to God. Whether our choice wins the election, whether we get the promotion and raise, whether some cute guy asks us out or our best friend, whether our business is going well or hardly at all - we are still grateful to God for all God has done for us and all humanity in seeking us in Christ Jesus. God is good, all the time; all the time, God is good.

There's something deeper about thanksgiving and gratitude than just how things are going along in our outer circumstances. Yes, we all like it better when things are smooth and positive. Yet God is good all the time; all the time God is good. Yes, we can be terribly upset at injustice, in loss and grief, when it seems like we are kin to Job in how bad things are happening and we don't deserve it. We can be terribly upset at prejudice, at how some people seem to get away with murder, how some corporations seem to suffer no consequences for their lack of

humanity to employees, or having no thought of environmental impact of their decisions - yet God is good all the time, and all the time God is good.

This year as we sit around our tables and think about our blessings, make sure we don't forget that the bedrock of gratitude is towards God, for seeking and finding us, for being born among us in Jesus, who was born for just this - his teaching, obedience and steadfastness till death. And for which God raised him up above all others, resurrected him in new life, which is now shared with us no matter what our outside events are like. AMEN.