

Food And Thanksgiving

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When the community of faith gathers to join hearts and voices in thanksgiving to Almighty God for all His benefits toward us, each of us comes with our own particular wellspring of thanksgiving. When we prepare to preach thanksgivings sermons, we instinctively reflect upon what the Lord had done for us and the members of our congregations during the course of the past year—the gifts of life, health of loved ones, of more than adequate provision for our daily needs, or possibly the gift of His sustaining grace and strength in the midst of difficulties, adversities, illness, hard times. Whatever the particular situation, thanksgiving is a time for us to take very literally the exhortation of the old hymn: “Count your many blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done.”

But the day of Thanksgiving is meant to be more than this. When we gather with our congregations, we are but a microcosm of the whole nation. We join with God’s people in cities and towns, in large churches and small, in all manner of circumstances, to raise our united voice in thanksgiving to God as a nation. For surely we would be an ungrateful people if we did not give God thanks for his mercies to our nation. What a sense of awe should be ours as we contemplate God’s providence that has put us where we are. We are heirs of the best that God has given to any people who have ever lived on the face of the earth. We are in a country that spans a continent, secure between two broad oceans, a country with the cream of the agricultural land in the world, the richest of nations in our natural resources, with wide open spaces yet to develop and enjoy, six per cent of the world’s people enjoying over forty percent of the world’s wealth. What have we done to deserve this?

But how can we sincerely offer thanks to God as a nation when we look beyond our own situation and see a world in such great need? With one-third of the world’s people living at or below starvation level; with hunger stalking the continents of Asia, Africa, and Latin America; with half the human race living on less than two hundred dollars per person per year; with malnutrition sapping their energy, stunting their bodies, shortening their lives; with simple, preventable diseases maiming and killing their children; with squalor and ugliness polluting and poisoning their surroundings—*how do we keep our words of thanksgiving from sticking in our throats?*

It is a question that calls us to look deeply into the sources of our faith for an answer. Our reflections here will be based on Psalm 103 and Luke 18:9-14; 19:1-10.

There are three types of thanksgiving expressed that are the options before us as citizens of this nation today. Let us call the first “lifeboat” thanksgiving, expressed in the prayer of the Pharisee: “God, I thank thee that I am not like other men.” This is thanksgiving that cuts us off from the rest of the world and

celebrates the fact that we are safe and secure in our lifeboat while the rest of the world drowns in an ocean of need. The second let us call "guilty conscience" thanksgiving, expressed in the sharply contrasting prayer of the tax-collector: "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" It is thanksgiving that begins to see the connections between our affluence and the world's want, and recognizes the need for God's saving forgiveness. The third might be called "responsive" thanksgiving, expressed in the response of Zacchaeus to his encounter with Jesus. It is thanksgiving that responds to the totally unmerited grace of God by becoming the channel of His mercy and justice in the world.

I.

Two men entered the temple to pray, said Jesus. They came into the same church, stood before the same God, had the same religious tradition, were bound together in the same body of believers. But there the similarity ends. For as Jesus wiretaps the prayer that is offered in the heart of each man, we realize the sharp difference between them. The prayer that is heard in the heart of the Pharisee is this: "Lord, I thank Thee that I am not as other men. I look around me and find so many that are not what they are supposed to be, so many who disobey your law, so many unworthy of your goodness. While I, I am an upright man. You have been very good to me, but I deserve it. For I have fulfilled all the requirements for your blessing. I can catalog before you my merits. I am among the select group on the face of the earth that can stand before you unashamed, worthy to receive all that you have to give."

Within that prayer is wrapped all the self-righteousness, all the prejudice of race and nation, all the indifference to widespread wretchedness that has characterized coldly comfortable people through the ages. To those who enter into a rich heritage, the greatest danger is that last citadel of sin—pride. People richly blessed are easily tempted to think that they deserve what they have received. But the end result, according to Jesus, is that people with such an attitude cannot stand justified before God. And God's kindness may well turn to severity in order that such pride may be humbled before Him.

A lively debate is underway among thinkers and policymakers in our nation over the concept of "lifeboat ethics."¹ It reflects an attitude which is seeping into the thinking of an increasing number of people, whether they realize it or not, toward the world's most desperately poor and hungry. It presumes that we in the rich nations of the world are in a lifeboat, surrounded by a vast sea of people who are in need. If we let any of them into our lifeboat, it will capsize. Much better that we not try to help them and let them drown, rather than that all of us should perish.

There are numerous things that are wrong with that reasoning but let me mention only three. First, the best analogy for our world is not a lifeboat but a spaceship. We cannot isolate ourselves from whole nations and peoples, for we are bound together with them in an increasingly interrelated planet. In fact, we in the "have" nations are becoming increasingly dependent on what the "have not" nations have in raw materials and natural resources for our own survival. Therefore we sink or swim together. Second, hungry and starving nations don't

just “fade away.” They become political powderkegs. To think of cutting off assistance from whole peoples in desperate need is to ask for a world of revolt, revolution, chaos, anarchy, that may spell destruction for us all. Third, what will it do to the soul of a nation that deliberately wills the death and starvation of millions of fellow human beings? By what kind of teaching shall we be able to convince our children that “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these rights are life . . .”?

Rabbi Marc Tannenbaum was speaking to a gathering of religious leaders from across the nation called together to find ways to alert the American public to the ominous dimensions of the world food crisis. Someone had expressed the cynical view that the American people, living in comfort and plenty, simply could not be aroused to this concern. To this Rabbi Tannenbaum responded: “In Nazi Germany, my people came through a holocaust in which a whole nation became so morally brutalized that they were willfully ignorant of the death of millions of fellow human beings whom they could have done much to save. Do we presume that the American people are so morally brutalized that they will remain willfully ignorant of a holocaust which will claim not millions but hundreds of millions of lives, which we of all the people on the earth can do most to prevent or to alleviate?”

If indeed our thanksgiving is tinged with the pride of the Pharisee, if we look in disdain at a world that is struggling for survival and close our hearts to any response to them, if we decide that the world we want to pass along to our children is a world in which we deliberately will by our neglect the death of millions of people—then may God have mercy on our souls.

II.

Standing over against the attitude of the Pharisee is the attitude of the tax-collector in Jesus’ parable. His is a very different prayer. When he came into the presence of Almighty God, he could not so much as lift up his eyes. For he knew that his own life wreaked with disobedience to God and abuse of his neighbor, and he rightly deserved God’s judgment. The prayer that welled up in his heart was a desperate cry: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

“The central dynamic of human life,” says Bruce Larson, “is what to do with guilt.” Guilt in and by itself can be terribly destructive. It can plunge a person into the depths of depression and despair. It can paralyze and immobilize us. But then again, a sense of guilt when accompanied by the acceptance of forgiveness can bring cleansing and renewal. It can be the springboard for starting all over again with a new sense of purpose. The distinctive task of the church is to take guilt, both personal and corporate, and respond to it with the proclamation of the forgiving and renewing power of the love of God in Christ, in order that we might start over again.

When we are really honest, we cannot help but have some sense of guilt for the part which we as individuals and as a nation have played in bringing about a world in which so many of God’s children live so perilously close to starvation. “Hunger,” someone has said, “is what happens when people stop caring for one

another." We are ashamed when we realize that the degree of our own affluence and wastefulness is one of the major reasons why there is not enough bread to spare for the poor of the world. "What most impressed you about America?" an international student was asked at the end of his stay in the United States. His immediate reply, "The size of your garbage cans." We rightfully have a sense of guilt when we realize that we are heirs of a civilization built upon a colonial era of four centuries which systematically exploited the nations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, as well as minorities in our own midst. We should feel guilty when we realize that we benefit from an international trade system by which we in the rich nations buy low and sell high, while those in the poor nations must buy high and sell low, so that we continually get richer while they inevitably get poorer. Certainly a sense of guilt about our part in creating and perpetuating this kind of world should get into our bones and spur us to genuine, thoroughgoing repentance.²

But "guilty conscience" thanksgiving is not enough. For unless it is acted upon it can turn into the acid of cynicism that is thrown upon all efforts to make the best of bad situations. It can lead to the attitude of the armchair prophet of doom, who excuses himself from any involvement in making things right and meeting human need now. We must go beyond "guilty conscience" thanksgiving if we are looking for thanksgiving at its best.

III.

What better model can there be than the "responsive" thanksgiving of the tax-collector Zacchaeus. His dramatic story is well known to us all. Straight across his life one day a line was drawn. Face to face he met Jesus of Nazareth. The whole impact of the Gospel was in that meeting. It redeemed the past, transformed the present, redirected the future. Fellowship with Jesus broke the hold riches had on him. His spontaneous gratitude was reflected in a whole new sense of values. By God's grace, he became a new man even in the midst of his old circumstances. His wealth became a channel of blessing to others. Recognizing that he himself had been part of the problem, he determined from that moment to become part of the answer.

In Zacchaeus, I believe we find thanksgiving at its best. It is thanksgiving that springs not so much from what God has done for us as from what He has done in us. As we count our blessings, we do more than measure whether this year's harvest is better than last, or list homes, cars, boats, TV sets. No, with the Psalmist we name what God has done in us—He "who forgives all our iniquity, heals all our diseases, redeems our life from destruction, crowns our lives with steadfast love and mercy, and satisfies us with good as long as we live." Among all our blessings, the greatest is that God gets at our sinful nature and our rebellious hearts, at all that is ugly and unholy in us, and removes it as far as the east is from the west.

Thanksgiving at its best takes me, like Zacchaeus, where I am, helps me to see my personal blessings in the light of God's larger purposes, and opens me that I may be a channel through which God's mercy and justice may flow into the world. This indeed is the sign of salvation—that I become the means whereby God can do what he wants to do in the world.

How do we pray a prayer of "responsive" thanksgiving in the world today? What, in very practical terms, are the works of mercy and justice by which we show our thanksgiving to God for His unmerited grace toward us?

There is so much that could be said. Let me speak of only four things. (1) We shall take very seriously the reality of hunger and poverty right where we are. Sometimes it is easy to dramatize hunger far away and to overlook the fact that genuine hunger and need is very close to our own doorsteps. We shall not understand the depth nor the dynamic of hunger abroad until we deal realistically with hunger near at hand. Through our struggle with the reality of hunger where we are, we begin to learn those lessons which will enable us to know how to respond to hunger around the world. And among those lessons, I believe the most precious may be that we in the church must get out of the paternalistic habit of doing things for people, and get into the habit of doing things with people, working with them toward their empowerment that they may help themselves.

(2) Responsive thanksgiving in our kind of world will lead us to take very seriously the stewardship of our citizenship, to press our nation toward fulfilling the role it should play in responding to world hunger and meeting the desperate need of poor nations for assistance in development. At the World Food Conference in Rome in November 1974, American congressmen were often heard to say, "I agree with all the recommendations coming out of this conference. But I don't have a constituency that backs me up. Whenever these issues arise in Congress, the only voices I hear are those of isolationism and self-interest." Thank God, the religious community in our nation is awakening to the fact that we have no more serious stewardship than our citizenship. Movements such as IMPACT and BREAD FOR THE WORLD³ are providing the kind of guidance by which individual Christians can know what are the crucial issues which are being decided by our leadership in government that will affect the survival of millions around the world. For example, at this Thanksgiving Season, Bread for the World is leading a nationwide offering of letters to our Senators and Representatives in Congress, urging that our nation reform its whole program of development assistance to poor nations so that we can better respond to the objectives set by the United Nations World Food Conference. This is a specific thing which we all can do to be part of the answer.

(3) "Responsive" thanksgiving in our kind of world means that we shall marshal the resources of the church itself to make the war on hunger a major part of our total Christian mission. The church has a task to do that no governments and international agencies can do—to show that people are precious, not just for political or economic benefits to ourselves, but because they have been created in the image of God with the potential of glorifying Him. The church in its world-wide mission can reach to the grassroots of virtually every developing nation in the world as governments cannot do, can work to develop those programs in agricultural development, nutrition education, public health and family planning, which in time can become the models which governments can follow. But—all this can happen only if the membership of the church is committed to consistent stewardship for that kind of mission. One presbytery of our denomination began a "two cents per person per meal" campaign to support our world hunger program. They figured, to their amazement, that if the 30,000

families of that presbytery did this consistently, in one year they would raise almost a million dollars! More than any other agency in our society, the church can make a dramatic difference in the war on hunger, and in the process give an immeasurably powerful witness to Christ.

(4) But the most practical thing is probably at the same time the most difficult and most important thing. Responsive thanksgiving will lead us to reexamine our whole style of life, individually and corporately. The "consumption explosion" in the United States and other affluent nations over the past generation is undoubtedly one of the factors that has brought us to a world food crisis. If one out of five people in the world used resources at our rate, the other four would have nothing. As American Christians take seriously the call of our Lord to a lifestyle which reflects our discipleship to Him, we shall reduce our wastefulness, make more efficient use of food, energy and our other resources, and become less a part of the problem and more a part of the answer.

At the close of the great Psalm of Thanksgiving, Psalm 103, as the Psalmist thinks upon the wondrous expanse of God's goodness, he pulls out all the stops and rolls along his music in a great crescendo, calling upon the whole creation to bless the Lord, since all are blessed by Him. Then at last the Psalm circles around to its beginning, and the singer calls on his own soul to add his little human praise to the thunderous chorus of the whole creation: "Bless the Lord, O my soul."

I am reminded of the story of Amy Carmichael, a missionary who gave her life with radiant joy to ministering among the untouchables in India. In later life she revealed that her decision to venture upon what seemed an impossible mission came from hearing a layman pray the simple prayer, "We thank Thee, Lord, that Thou art able."

This is thanksgiving at its best—thanksgiving to God that He is able to take our feeble effort to express His mercy and His justice and to blend it into the mighty music of His work for the salvation of the world. Let this be the spirit of our thanksgiving: "Bless the Lord, O my soul."

¹ For a summary of the "lifeboat ethic" debate, see Dieter T. Hessel, ed., *Beyond Survival: Bread and Justice in Christian Perspective* (New York: Friendship Press, 1977), chapter 2. The book is a symposium of studies done in various cities across the United States, covening theologians, educators, pastors, and bureaucrats with food producers, consumers, and leaders of action groups, to explore in depth some dimension of the hunger issue. Also for a closer look at the debate, see George R. Lucas, Jr., and Thomas W. Ogletree, ed., *Lifeboat Ethics: The Moral Dilemmas of World Hunger* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

² A formative book on the hunger issue is Frances Moore Lappe and Joseph Collins, *Food First: Beyond the Myth of Scarcity* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977). Tracing the present world food crisis to its roots in the "colonial inheritance," it contends that the crisis consists in the increasing monopolization of the world's arable land and its produce by the wealthy elite of the Third World and the expanding multinational economic powers of the West.

³ Further information can be secured by writing the Task Force on World Hunger, 341 Ponce de Leon Ave., N.E., Atlanta, Ga. 30308.