

“Memory and Hope”
November 23, 2014

Joel 2:21-27
Matthew 6:25-33

There’s a wonderful and problematic Thanksgiving hymn titled: “Not Alone for Mighty Empire.” It’s not in our hymnal and the lyrics are dated at best. But it has this great line that, in a somewhat convoluted or poetic way, describes our situation: “Standing in the living present/Memory and hope between.” It reminds us that at Thanksgiving—and in all of life, really—we constantly find ourselves right here, between the past and the future, perhaps looking back or looking ahead, and always trying “stand” in the fullness of life in the present moment.

This is not always an easy task. You know how difficult the “living present” can be—and this year those difficulties are readily apparent. We’ll come back to that.

But first, consider: Thanksgiving gives us the opportunity to remember.

We remember our past.

In particular, these days call us to remember our rootedness in the earth and the goodness of the growing season now past. We look back on the year now coming to an end and give thanks. Once, in a time unknown to almost all of us, we looked at the gathered crops and prepared for the hardships and privations of winter. That’s not so much the case anymore, yet even in our time the days are short and gray and we still very much feel the winter pressing upon us.

So, it is fitting that we look back and give thanks to God for all we have received. And most of us here today? Well, we’ve received quite a lot of *stuff*, haven’t we? In spite of the current economic turmoil in our country and in the world, we live in the wealthiest nation in history. Compared to the rest of the world, *we* are the 1%. To an extent that much of the world cannot imagine, we do not worry about what we will eat, what we will drink, or what we will wear. All these things have been given to us. Even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed as we are.

I need to be clear about what I’m saying here, because often clergy are not. Having “things” is not bad in and of itself. We should receive with gladness the good that God provides, enjoy the fruits of our labor, and be prosperous people. A spirit of thankfulness reminds us that we have what we have because it has been given to us.

At the same time, a spirit of thankfulness grows not only out of what we have but also out of what we have lost.

Life *is* fragile—we know that. Accidents happen, illness runs its course, bodies fail. The fragility of life was a common theme in ancient literature. For all of our progress, all of our focus on security, and all of our planning, the fragility of life continues to be a part of our daily reality.

An awareness of this fragility *can* lead to fear and to envy. And yet, an awareness of the fragility of life can also lead to a deepening sense of grace—God’s care for creation, and for us, in our prosperity and in many dangers, toils and snares.

The prophet Joel vividly remembered the devastation of a plague of locusts: all that the swarming locust had eaten, calling the hopper, the destroyer, the cutter—the great army of God, which Joel imagined was sent for correction, for the ultimate good of the people. Even with the memory of great loss, Joel’s message is a call to give thanks.

The novelist Andre Dubus, who lost a leg in an automobile accident, writes about gratitude and its connection with other people. “We receive and we lose, and we must try to achieve gratitude; and with that gratitude to embrace with whole hearts whatever of life that can remain after the losses. No one can do this alone, for being absolutely alone finally means a life not only without people or God or both to love, but without love itself.”¹

Remembering and giving thanks, then, is an act of this whole community. We stand with each other in sorrow and loss so that out of the challenges and difficulties of life we can move forward together.

Perhaps the dried bittersweet branches that decorate many tables are fitting symbols of this time when we are invited to “embrace with whole hearts whatever of life remains after the losses.” Other people are essential to a life of gratitude, which perhaps explains why the highways and airports are so busy this week—and why we keep gathering together week after week all year long.

Thanksgiving, then, is a wrapping up, a feast of fulfillment. We give thanks for what we have. We give thanks for those at the table—and for those who have left the table.

We look back, we remember, we give thanks.

But there is something else—the future.

The sociologist, Robert Bellah, put it this way: “Communities of memory that tie us to the past also turn us toward the future as communities of hope.”

Memories that tie us to the past also turn us toward the future in hope. We have a past, but we don’t live in it. As we recall who we have been, even more we envision what we want to become.

The prophet Joel sets our eyes on the horizon of the future. After a devastating plague of locusts destroyed all the crops and left the land desolate, Joel called the people to repentance—to consider a new way of life before God. The past held no hope for him. Instead, Joel called the people to look toward God’s future when they would once again be filled and satisfied. Not only the people, but the animals and even the very soil are told: “Do not fear. Be glad and rejoice for God has done great things!”

This is the way of our faith. We look forward, not backward.

Thanksgiving calls us to gratitude. But even more, it calls us to live with hope toward the future because all of time is held in God's hands.

So, we can listen with fresh ears as Jesus speaks to us in the living present, between memory and hope. We are invited this day and every day to trust God for the present day—with all its trouble and opportunity. And in that trust we work toward the realm of God—seeking to extend the peace and well-being that we know to an ever-widening number of people, those we know and those we will never know.

I said at the beginning of this sermon that this year the difficulties of the “living present” are readily apparent. Perhaps they always are. This year our hearts are heavy with sorrow and fear over the war between Israel and Hamas. We watch as Russia continues to attack Ukraine, as yet another year comes to an end. We keep living as though the changing climate is not threatening all of life, but it is. And the challenges in our individual lives are there every day.

Remember this: thanksgiving is a community activity.

When life is difficult, in a community, someone else knows how to get through.

When life is difficult, in a community, others are here to be with you.

When life is good, in a community, you can share that goodness with others

When life is good, in a community, you can share your abundance.

In a community of thanksgiving—in *this congregation*—we remind each other that it is not the strength of our arm, or the brilliance of our minds or the skill of our art, but the grace of God that gives us all good gifts. We forget that on our own, but in a community, others are there to give a gentle reminder of the gentle goodness of God.

The world is not a closed system of limited resources. Out of our faith and friendship we can see that the world is an open system “created by God at every moment and infinitely rich in resources provided by God for humans to exist and prosper in cooperation.”

In faith, we recognize that there *are* times, when, against the odds, or contrary to what we feared, something good happens. And in the midst of times of trial we are perhaps better able to see the God who brings life out of death, who makes all things new. A profound joy is possible even in the most difficult of times.

Between memory and hope, here in the living present, let us remember, as Joel tells us, that God has dealt wondrously with us.

Between memory and hope, here in the living present, let us, as Jesus encourages us, seek first the realm of God.

This Thursday let us stop and reclaim a little of our common humanity—our citizenship in a world of great pain and simple joy.

Let us laugh at the little things that continue delight. Let our hearts be gladdened by the simple presence of family and friends.

Let us remember with gratitude that we are part of a community that rejoices with us and weeps with us.

Let us give thanks for all the good that we have received—not from our own strength, not from the strength of our hands or the vast knowledge of our minds but from the good and generous hand and loving heart of God.

And let us renew our commitments to this world, this life, this living present so that coming generations might give thanks for our stewardship of the gifts we have received.

And let us go from this week and Thanksgiving Day seeking to be a little more like the One whom we choose to follow: welcoming, receiving, healing, and astonished by the gratitude that we discover in others—and even in ourselves.

Let us pray: We give you thanks O God, for memories of your goodness in this past year and in years past. Even more we thank you for the hope that we have in your future, and in the coming of your realm of peace when all your people will gather together at the great banquet in thanksgiving and praise. Keep us always in your care and by your Spirit equip us for your work of love in the world; through Jesus Christ. Amen.

¹ *Inspired* pg. 40.