

Thanksgiving: Festival, Prayer, Attitude

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Preacher: Harvey Guest

[0 : 00] So this being Thanksgiving, we are going to have a, what I hope will be a very special Sunday.

We're having three speakers for 10 to 15 minutes each on aspects of Thanksgiving. The first, which I have taken on, is festival. The second is prayer.

And we are very honored to have Lynn Unger with, I think, something quite personal, taking this on. And then Harvey Guest will bring it to a nice conclusion with talk about Thanksgiving as attitude. And then we should have a substantial amount of time for the inspirations that you have received to flow back to everyone.

[1 : 11] Is there a thing of which it is said, see, this is new. It has been already in the ages before us.

There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to happen. If that doesn't strike you as familiar, it's from Ecclesiastes.

And you will come to see how this is very appropriate to what we're doing today. I've asked each person to do a little bit of self-introduction.

And this is, for my self-introduction, I'm going to tell you that there is a verse that I voluntarily memorized as a child.

The church that I grew up in, which was the Presbyterian church, distinguished itself from the lower class churches by not doing Bible memory verses.

[2 : 20] We did memorize occasional psalms. But this is a verse that really spoke to my heart as a child.

And I memorized it and still carry it with me. While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease.

Genesis 8.22, a promise to Noah after the flood. The first part of that verse is really appropriate to today.

Seedtime and harvest. Ultimately, Thanksgiving is a harvest festival. Now, for most of us, and here's a chance for just a show of hands, I'll start personally by saying that on my father's side, I'm two generations off the land.

My grandfather had a farm. On my mother's side, I'm guessing, I'm not even sure, that I'm three generations off the land. Is there anybody who has actually themselves farmed?

[3 : 33] Wow. So, and then, is there anybody who has no memory of any of that kind of connection with the land?

Okay, so we, you know, we're stretching a real spectrum there. Anyway, decreasingly, do we have connection to the land? Do we harvest and prepare our own food?

Do we slaughter our own animals? And that may have something to do with our sense of thanksgiving? Let's turn to our most familiar calendar.

And I'm not talking about the liturgical calendar where this is just one of those mini Sundays after Trinity. I'm talking about this is a holiday.

And how do we know it's a holiday? Well, we go and see what the Ministry of Labor for British Columbia has to say on its website.

[4 : 37] And it tells us that we have 10 statutory holidays. Now, that's an interesting phrase, statutory holidays. It means that on the one hand, there's something legal, there's something governmental, there's something to do with the state.

And on the other, there's, whoops, if we dig into it, there's a holy day. So much for separation of church and state. If we try to categorize the 10 that we have, or will have, four have to do pretty well with the state.

Victoria, Canada, BC, and Remembrance. One is astronomical, New Year's. Two are recent inventions.

One is very recent. Family Day coming second of Monday in February 2013 for the first time. The other being Labor Day. Then we have two that are clearly religious, Good Friday and Christmas. And then we have this one other, which is Thanksgiving. Which we'll take a little bit more of a look at. Shifting to a different calendar.

[6 : 06] If we look at 1 Enoch 72 through 82. I know you don't read 1 Enoch as a matter of course.

It's a Jewish document which is no later than the third century. Here, for the first time, an extant Jewish document describes a full calendar.

The author thought the year began just after the spring equinox. Our years.

We have more than one year. And having worked with an educational institution, I probably in my heart always felt that the year began in September. Much more than it did January the 1st.

The Temple Scroll from Qumran, which is somewhere in the neighborhood of 100 to 200 B.C.

[7 : 08] actually gives us a lot of detail on what they thought their year looked like. At least in terms of the big holidays or festivals.

It's numbered by month and by day of month. So the year begins with the 14th day of the first month being Passover.

And concludes with the 15th to the 22nd days of the 7th month.

And then there are five other months that sort of are like Trinity. They sort of are the time in between. Feast or festival.

What do we think of? The components are eating. They are gathering together. They're celebrating. They're celebrating. And we don't often think of this, but they are making a pilgrimage.

[8 : 20] If we go to our familiar Latin word, festival, it ultimately goes back and relates to the Latin word for temple.

And if we really get etymological and carry it even further back, the Indo-European root basically has the meaning of holy.

The word feast, based on the Hebrew, which is hag, is used almost exclusively of the three great annual pilgrim festivals, unleavened bread, weeks, and booths.

Or in 2012. Passover in April. Shavuot, Pentecost in April. Sukkot, Tabernacles in October.

Shifting gears just a little bit and getting some New Testament brought in. The Gospel of Luke shows us Jesus in the temple at the age of 12. Why was he there?

[9 : 25] His family was involved in an annual participation in a Passover festival. They had made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

The verb related to the word for feast, haggad, basically means to make pilgrimage, to keep a pilgrim feast.

And it's cognate with the Arabic, hajj, to make pilgrimage to Mecca. All three festival calendars that we have in the Bible, in Exodus, Leviticus, and in Deuteronomy, place the Festival of Booths, the seven-day festival, in the seventh month, last in the series, intimating that it came at the end of the year, before the beginning of the new.

If you look at the Bible passages, there are strong contextual associations with Sabbath and with having no other gods.

If you take the Hebrew Bible on its own and look at the Jewish liturgy, they group five scrolls. They call them the five Megalot.

[10 : 47] And Song of Songs is associated with and read on Passover. Ruth, and this, if you think about Ruth and your recollections of it, you will see this very clearly.

It is associated with weeks. Shavuot, Pentecost, the grain harvest. Lamentations is probably least familiar to us, and it's associated with the ninth of Av, a recollection of being carried to Babylon.

The two remaining ones, Ecclesiastes, is associated with the Feast of Booths, the harvest festival, the ones that we are closest to with our practice for Thanksgiving.

And finally, Esther, very clearly, is associated with Purim, which is not something we celebrate. So, to close, I'd just like to read a few passages which are very similar from Ecclesiastes, which in a way are appropriate to Thanksgiving.

There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God.

[12 : 15] For apart from him, who can eat or who can have enjoyment? I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live.

Also, that it is God's gift to man that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil. I know that whatever God does endures forever.

Nothing can be added to it nor anything taken from it. God has made it so in order that men should fear before him. Behold, what I have seen to be good and to be fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life which God has given him, for this is his lot.

And I commend enjoyment for man has no good thing under the sun but to eat and drink and enjoy himself for this will go with him in his toil through the days of life which God gives him under the sun. Under the sun, I think, is an important phrase and it recurs many times. you could tell any Bible reader that phrase and they would know where it was coming from.

[13 : 42] It means that we're mortal, that we are part of a world that passes away but it is recognized that there is something beyond that which does last.

And in final conclusion, not to stay in the Old Testament and be too Jewish, I want to come to the New Testament and, you know, there were Puritans who looked at the Bible and said we shouldn't celebrate Christmas and that's a whole other topic but the way that we celebrate Thanksgiving or don't or maybe have materialized and desacralized it and hopefully we've opened up a little of the wonder of Thanksgiving as we had it in the past close with a brief passage from the New Testament which is probably our harvest festival, our Thanksgiving.

Now on the first day of unleavened bread, the disciples came to Jesus saying, Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover? Which he had done when he was twelve.

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to the disciples and said, Take, eat, this is my body and he took a cup and when he had given thanks he gave it to them saying, Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

I tell you, I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you and my Father's kingdom. Fruit of the vine, that would be the fall harvest, not the grain harvest.

[15 : 56] And we are at the time of the fall harvest. So there's Thanksgiving as festival and now we'll hear from Lynn Unger on Thanksgiving as prayer.

Thank you, Joseph. Good morning. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Lynn Unger and I am the assistant youth minister here at St. John's and I have to say that I love my job.

I love working with the youth of St. John's and I consider it such a privilege and I don't take the responsibility lightly. So to open this time, I thought that I would read a passage of scripture to us. It's from 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 verses 16 to 18 and this is what it says. Be joyful always. Pray continually.

Give thanks in all circumstances. For this is God's will for you in Jesus Christ. The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. So, Mania asked me to say just a few things about an experiment for lack of a better term that we started at our house almost two years ago.

[17 : 23] I spoke about this at Christmas time as well. Maybe some of you heard but back in May of 2011, I read a book and it was called One Thousand Gifts by Anne Voskamp.

I don't know if anyone's read that or not but the premise of the book was that someone challenged her to think of a thousand things that she could be thankful for and to write those down over the course of the year.

And so, I was really encouraged by that and I thought I would like to do that experiment as well. So, our family happened to be traveling at the time and it's very important to me when I start a new journal that it's something that feels good in my hands and that I like.

And so, I picked out this journal and I started to pray and I started to write. And friends, I have to say that what happened was nothing profound but it was something beautiful that Jesus did in my heart and continues to do in my heart.

I think that when we offer thanks to God, it's a call to see the world differently. It's a call to see the world through new eyes.

[18 : 36] And as I read the scriptures and as I asked God to help me understand his word in a new way, I started to realize the true grace and the thing that I always had to be thankful for was Jesus Christ.

That even if there was nothing that I could see around me to be thankful for, which there was so much, but even if there was nothing, Jesus Christ realizing that I had nothing, that I deserve nothing, and that everything that was given to me in Jesus Christ really started to shape me differently and started to allow me to see the world in a new way.

So, what I realized is that by saying thank you, it draws my heart from looking at my circumstances and it draws it up to Jesus.

the true one, the true giver of life and the thing that can never be taken away. We're studying the book of Colossians with our young adults right now and in the opening chapter of Colossians it talks about this hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that is what being thankful for draws our eyes towards.

Psalms 107, verse 1 says, give thanks to the Lord for he is good. His love endures forever. Once again, something that can't be taken away.

[20 : 03] But, the fun thing about this is my daughter and I started to do this and I've been doing this for a year and a half. I thought I would quit at Christmas time when I got up to a thousand but I just couldn't.

I'm up to 2,500 and I hope it's not a legalistic thing for me, it's just something that reminds me to see the world differently around me and it's kind of cute now because my daughter who's 10 will see something or will be out and she'll say, mom, are you going to put that in her thankful journal tonight?

So, it's kind of cute and it just, it shapes my day like even in small ways. I was on playground supervision this last week and I saw this beautiful little girl, she was probably in grade one, she ran out of the school in her little uniform and her socks that were pushed around her ankles and her hair was coming out of braids and I just remember saying like, thank you Jesus, like what a beautiful, what a beautiful image today and it just reminds me that God is always at work in the world around me and it's instead, it's just this attitude of being able to look and see where he's working and see where I can join him and so anyways, that's just an aside and that's what this little book is just full of for me, nothing profound but just ways that I've seen God working in the world around me.

Some of you will know Daryl Johnson who was up until recently a professor at Regent College and one of the things that he said that really helped me when I was listening to his course on pastoral care was that what he does, one of his disciplines, is that he writes down every day 20 things to be thankful for and the reason why he does that is because in pastoral work, in all of our lives, sometimes things can get fairly dark.

We see, I know when I see a family who's hurting or a youth who's hurting, I just, I take that to heart and I feel it very, very deeply and suddenly everything can feel dark and so what Daryl does is he writes 20 things every day just to put, to draw his heart back up to Jesus and I have found that to be really, really helpful to be able to pray and give those things that hurt to Jesus and then to be able to look upwards.

[22 : 22] Finally, the last thing that this is teaching me to do, albeit so imperfectly, is to be able to take a passage of scripture and to be able to pray it back to Jesus with thanksgiving, back to God with thanksgiving.

So, for example, take Psalm 23 just because that's what my daughter and I are learning right now. So, the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. And what our prayer can be is, Jesus, thank you that you're my shepherd.

Thank you that you give me everything I need. Thank you that when I walk through those dark valleys that you are there with me, that your rod and your staff, that they comfort me. And so I'm finding that that is one thing that is really helping me personally in my prayer life, being able to take what's true in God's word and be able to reflect that back in prayer.

And so, finally, I don't know, you can pick these up on the way out if you're interested. But I thought these were kind of cool. These are something that some of the ladies, when I told them in the, and some of the ladies in the office printed these off for us if you're interested.

And basically, they're just little things to remind us to be thankful. We can use them as bookmarks, you can write on the back, whatever you like. But this one just says grace, gratitude, and joy.

[23 : 40] And I love this one because it just reminds me of God's grace shown to me in Jesus Christ that results in thanksgiving. And as we lift our highs and thank Jesus, that that results in joy in our lives.

So if any of you would like those, those are here for you. And thank you so much for letting me talk to you this morning. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Speaking of Mania, who couldn't be with us today or is otherwise engaged, she runs, as you know, the quiet service a couple times a month and help from some people here today.

And I usually say, a brief word at that service a couple weeks ago when it was last on, I walked up to this pulpit and I've forgotten.

It was the first time this has happened. I've forgotten to turn off my cell phone and it literally went off when I was three steps away from this. So I turned around and walked back and made it stop making that noise.

[25 : 08] I share that with you. I don't recall if I was thankful on that occasion. I must confess to you, I'm not sure. But, you know, life takes you by surprise at times, isn't it?

I'd forgotten the good idea to say something about oneself as you approach this profound topic. I can just tell you I appreciate as there's so many things.

J.O. Johnson has such a great anecdote that he has the discipline of 20 things a day. I'm sure he'll tell you that on some days he can probably keep going for quite a while. I'm thankful for the coffee shops of Vancouver.

And I know many of you are. I have found some as just beautiful places. You meet some interesting people, especially if you have maybe one that you have you're fairly frequent at.

And one of, I'm also thankful, I'm sort of thankful for, on occasion in coffee shops, I peruse a magazine called the London Review of Books.

[26 : 16] Books. And in one of its latest issues I read a very interesting piece. It's pretentious, the London Review of Books.

It's usually philosophers reviewing books by scientists. So the kind of people that no one understands either the scientist or the philosopher. But, and this was by way, now you know something about me.

I love Vancouver coffee shops, coffee, and the London Review of Books, as frustrating as it is to read it. And a lot of what I'm going to say today is based upon a recent article that I found very interesting.

I find a lot of articles on that. It's very, of course, a very secular, godless publication. Although now and again it touches upon things relating to our faith that are very interesting.

So, again, some of this is sort of, I'm meditating on today's topic with this article very much in the background. Therefore, I can begin with a question and you'll recognize it as the kind of question that you might come across in this kind of literature.

[27 : 30] Is there, we may ask, is there an optimal, is there a best description of the world? That's quite a question.

Is there an optimal, a very good, a best, even best description of the world? That's a good philosophical question.

In some philosophical circles, of course, it would be frowned upon immediately when I wouldn't like to go down that path. But it's still asked. If so, how would it be recognized as such, we can ask. What criteria met equals, you know, there's the best description of the world. I've got it for you. A simple and yet very comprehensive answer simply says, and this would be very popular in some circles that deal with this kind of thing, such a description answers the best questions about the world posed by physics, the hardest of the hard scientists, and then by metaphysics or by some final kind of thinking about these things.

So you've got physics, you know, the kind of stuff that Stephen Hawking deals with and other prestigious names in our culture. People defer to physicists. They really have the hardest of the scientists.

[28 : 59] They tell you what the real world is really like. No fooling around. And then there's a kind of talk about that, which might be called metaphysics or meta-metaphysics, the final kind of talking but about physics.

There it is. This gives us, and you might watch for it at your local bestseller, at your local bookseller, this would give us the book of the world that might be called.

The real final book of the world. The optimal best description of the world where we are. There it is. The only thing excluded in this kind of very, one kind of very modern thinking, very prestigious, powerful kind of thinking, the thing excluded, frequently at least, is of course the thinker.

The guy or the girl who wrote the book of the world. The thinker has been excluded. The mystery of human awareness has been excluded.

excluded. The given condition which makes all inquiry possible has been excluded due in awareness.

[30 : 29] That's very strange. See, everything is physics. This is what a lot of the best, the people advertise as the most powerful intellects that history has ever produced.

That would be our best thinkers right now. What tells that everything is physics and somehow on this view thinking itself is physics. Get your mind around that.

This is the way a lot of people are taught. The best thinkers in our time would say this is it. This is the best description of the world that we now have and will ever have. That's it.

A Christian, a biblical, a Christian tradition saturated view of the world or I want to call it our book of the world.

Our book of the world. We have one, you know. Our book of the world would identify a most deep, a deeper exclusion at work here.

[31 : 39] a very deep exclusion and today you know what that is. It being the kind of Sunday today is.

What has been excluded from the world very powerfully in our time is thanks or gratitude. That has been excluded from the world even more than the thinker if you will.

What has been excluded from the world is thanksgiving. a wondering awareness that I am, that you are, that we are given in the world.

That's what we are. We are given in the world. There's no alternative to that. Way down deep in us, way down deep in every human is this, now I want to call it, boy, the London Review of Books would never have too much language like this in it.

Way down deep in us all is this gift, gratitude, foundation. On a biblical Christian view, that is just the truth.

[32 : 58] There's a gift, I am gift, and I am gratitude for gift, foundation to everything. Thanksgiving, after all, which we're talking about here today, celebrated in festival, celebrated beautifully in a little book, which we kept being told, oh, there's nothing deep here, but there's a lot deep in that little book.

Thanksgiving gratitude is recognition, isn't it? That's what is so fundamental in the world. we are, and this is a kind of in language in some circles, but I'm glad it is, it's a language, it should be known, we are persons in relation, God is person in relation, we are persons in relation, and the primal first relation is forever a relation with our creator.

That's where we start everything. you can't get away from that start, according to the Bible, it's just there. You're a creature, and you know it, and there's a creator, and you know it.

You are a gift, and you are gratitude for gift. That's where thinking starts. That's the foundation of everything.

The refusal to give thanks, is, as Paul tells the Romans, you'll recall, that's the primal sin.

Thanksgiving is no little added extra onto life, a nice little psychological gimmick that will make you feel better on a gloomy weekend.

[34 : 52] Thanksgiving is what we were created for. Rejecting this, we go into a far country, and there we live on garbage.

The modern world is giving us to live on garbage. London Review of Books, its ultimate view of the world, I would say, it's brilliantly sophisticated, it keeps you up to date on the most brilliant, scintillating thinking of our time, and the spiritual food it represents is garbage.

There's no gratitude there for a creator who gave us the gift of life. That doesn't fit into their world. No. Brilliant folks.

Unbeloved. Smart as are. You can imagine scientists and philosophers. It's garbage. salvation is a return to thanks, I think we can say.

That's what salvation is. You return and say thank you, God, for the gift of life, the gift of everything that you tell me you've given me. Thank you.

[36 : 07] That's what Thanksgiving. There is, of course, we have to say this, I think, on Thanksgiving Sunday. If this is a footnote, I think it's an important footnote. There is, in the world, do I have to tell anybody in this room?

There is, in the world, much sadness. It's a certain sense, this is where the case against Thanksgiving begins. We'll talk about this too much. There is, in the world, much sadness, much grief, and therefore, here's the thing, the Bible says, therefore, there is much opportunity for lament. Lament. Lament is the refusal to deny grief, and it's the refusal of unbelief. Psalms are filled with lament.

Lament. There is such grief in the world, my God. He knows it. He says, come to me with your grief. Come to me with lament. Do not refuse, do not pretend that there isn't much grief, but also you must refuse unbelief.

That's why the Psalms will say things like, I will yet praise him. I know there's grief and sadness that covers us, that hides the always good reasons for Thanksgiving, but they're hidden by grief.

[37 : 34] I will yet praise him. My help and my God. As the great Anglican poet put it, I will lament and I will love.

George Herbert. I will lament and I will love. I will lament and I will give thanks. I will give thanks to God always.

So, is there a best and optimal view of the world? world? Well, I think, is this not true? We will have such a view in heavenly mystery someday.

Someday we will have a best, an optimal view of what reality is. Now, we see in a glass darkly, then face to face.

Yes, for sure. But between now and then, we might say that we remember on Thanksgiving Sunday that there's a kind of bridge in the world, a bridge full of song and glory and life and health and strength.

[38 : 47] Anticipating now in attitude, that's a good word, thank you for that word, anticipating now in attitude our home. So we can say always let us now give thanks for it is seemly so to do.

It's always seemly to give thanks because God is there. He's given us the gift of existence. He's giving us salvation. Despite all of the sadness in the world, the pain, we can lament that as we wait for the triumph of those things which make us and will make us eternally filled with thanksgiving. What will heaven be if not? A place of endless thanks. Endless thanks. A postscript. I found this very helpful in a story, just a final word.

Traditional Christianity, I'm paraphrasing here, a great historian named Brad Gregory from the Notre Dame in the United States. Traditional Christianity is both a set of ideas, creeds, dogma, doctrine, etc.

Learning exchange, we gather to rehearse much of that. And it is equally, he's picturing the church as it always should be. It is also a shared way of life with love, with keratos, love at its center.

[40 : 28] Isn't that wonderful? What is the church? Set of ideas, creeds, dogma, doctrine, and at the very same time, it must be a shared way of love, a shared way of life with love at its center.

nature. He's proposing a way back to unity for the churches, in fact. It's a good Catholic history. Let us love truth and let us love a shared way of life with love at its center, love.

And yes, with, of course, thanksgiving, shaping everything always. Let us give thanks always. that's what I wanted to share with you today.