

Sunday, November 18, 2012
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Thanksgivings To God”

What do baptism, hurricane relief, Every Member Canvass and Thanksgiving have in common?

Each one provides an opportunity for us to experience God’s grace.

Grace is a power given by God that enables the soul to perform some particular act.

Theologically, there are all different types of grace, but practically, for us, grace is simply a knowing of God.

It is when we understand that God is present in our lives.

As we welcome little Henry into our Christian community – God is here.

When we delivered food, clothing and items necessary for survival to the folks in Bridgeport on Thursday, God was there.

When we heed Paul’s advice and accept responsibility for the stewardship of our church and the support of our ministries – God is here.

When we gather with our families around the table on Thursday and give thanks for our many blessings, God will be there.

Grace is a gift from God -

Grace has always been used as a word to describe favor, good will, elegance or beauty.

The word ‘grace’ is derived from the Latin word ‘gratia,’ the same root word that gives us gracias – thank you in Spanish.

When we start a meal with ‘grace’ it is a formal way of giving thanks for what we are about to eat.

I have included some suggestions for table graces in your bulletin today.

I invite you to include grace as part of your Thanksgiving gatherings.

Take a few moments out of the hectic day and bring your hearts and voices together in prayer.

The graces are short and can easily be offered by a child.

There are nine to choose from – so why not choose one for each week, for the next nine weeks.

Or, make up your own.

A communal family grace is one that goes around the table with each person contributing.

It gives the gathered group an opportunity to recognize all of the things that individuals are thankful for.

So why do we give thanks and what happens when we don't?

We give thanks as a way of remembering what is good in our lives.

When we enumerate what we are thankful for we cannot help but appreciate the abundance of blessings in our lives.

There is so much that we take for granted.

If you start by looking around you will recognize not only that you have food and shelter, but someone, somewhere grew that food, nourished it in the soil, tended to its growth, harvested it, packaged it, shipped it to a store where you bought it – all before it got to your table.

What about the tablecloth – again, cotton grown, picked, processed, woven, sold – found its way into your dining room.

If your family is coming to visit, they will come in cars or on planes or trains that someone manufactured, over highways that someone constructed, all designed to bring them safely to your door.

This exercise could go on and on, as you well know, but the point is clear – gratitude is humbling.

This week we launched our annual Every Member Canvass – you each received a pledge card and you are asked to let the trustees know how much money you will give to support the work of the church.

I read about one church that tried something entirely different with its stewardship campaign.

Their program was called, Faith-Promise Stewardship.

The idea was to ground the issue of giving in each person's relationship with God.

They did away with the old fashioned idea of a "pledge card."

Instead, each person was asked to pray and seek God's help in deciding how much they wanted to give to the church for the work of Christ.

Based on their faith in God's ability to provide enough for them to give, they would make a promise of a gift for the work of the church.

That amount was indicated on a Faith-Promise Card, without a signature, so that the church could plan a budget for the year.

But the key idea was that giving would become a matter of the relationship between each person and God.

No reminders from the church office. No committee scanning the donor lists – just a personal commitment with God as the witness.

Now...our the scripture for today contains some very important principles for giving that lift up two things:

- 1) Giving is fulfilling for the giver and
- 2) Faith-giving is giving that can more than meet the needs of the church's ministry.

In the early church, giving came out of grace and joy--not out of guilt and not in response to a campaign.

It was Faith based giving!

People were enthusiastic about the church, about the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

They were demonstrating their commitment to Jesus Christ by sustaining the early efforts to spread the good news.

In an article on stewardship John Jewell pointed out that in “authentic biblical giving, there are two things we need to do and three things God will do.

Two things that we need to do:

- We need to sow generously in order to reap generously.
- We need to make a Heart Decision. The decision comes from within not from without.

Jewell promises that if we do our part, there are...

Three things that God will do:

1. God will supply His Grace

That takes us back to the early definition of grace being a power given by God that enables the soul to perform some particular act. Christian giving is not motivated by guilt, duty or any human emotion, but rather by God's grace.

2. God will supply the Seed

Seed is the giving we invest in our ministry.

Paul's letter says “You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us.”

3. God makes it possible for us to be Generous

This is not a prosperity gospel message that you will get rich if you support your church.

No, this is the fundamental message of the power of God's love to transform us.

When you open your heart to God's grace and God's love you are abundantly wealthy in spirit.

A joyful life is not necessarily tied to material wealth but it is most certainly tied to spiritual richness.

Jewell concludes with this argument: *When stewardship is authentically rooted in God's love and grace and in the Christian's relationship with God, the whole church will find the giving of the community an amazing thing. Instead of saying, "How wonderful these people are," they will find themselves drawn to how wonderful God is. When giving flows out of our honest, inner gratitude for the love and mercy of God, it results in a dramatic ability for the church to have an impact on the world around it.*

My friends, we have much to be thankful for. Let us embody God's love in our own lives and go out into the world with generous hearts open to receive God's grace.