

November 22: Thanksgiving Sunday

Message: Response-Ability

Scripture: Joel 2:18-28

Text: James 1:17 “Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above. These gifts come down from the Father, the creator of the heavenly lights, in whose character there is no change at all.”

Memory Verse: James 1:17a “Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above.”

Blurb: Thanksgiving is the holiday when we stop to give thanks for the harvest and all that we have. But the Bible teaches us that thanksgiving really isn’t a response to what we have. It’s about God in our lives, who made us with the need to give thanks. This Sunday, we’ll go beneath the cultural calling of thanksgiving and discover the biblical push to connect it to God’s character. Don’t miss this Sunday, it’ll change your Thanksgiving!

Opening Song: *Hymn Sing* -Andrew

Welcome: -David

Memory Verse: -David

James 1:17a “Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above.”

Worship Music Set: -Sanctify

Only King Forever

Reckless Love

How Great Thou Art

Worship Prayer

Serve: UM Student Sunday Offering

Offering: *Rejoice* -Sanctify

Message: “Response-Ability” -David

PP#1: Responseability

James 1:17 “Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above. These gifts come down from the Father, the creator of the heavenly lights, in whose character there is no change at all.”

Response-Ability. A sermon on thankfulness. My text is James 1:17, “Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above. These gifts come down from the Father, the creator of the heavenly lights, in whose character there is no change at all.”

I want to begin with a prayer for thanksgiving, using the first couple of lines from the poem “Gratefulnesse” by Welsh poet and English priest George Herbert, from 1633. Pray with me: Lord, “Thou that hast given so much to me, give one more thing: a grateful heart.” Amen.

PP#2: GODISNOWHERE

[Write out “GODISNOWHERE”]

I want you to take a look at this sentence, but I have written it without putting in the spaces. Can you still read what it says? Can you see that it says, “God is nowhere.” We’re coming up to Thanksgiving, and we’re told we need to be thankful. But sometimes we look around and we struggle to see much good. Things have gone wrong. Someone close to us has died. Painful memories flood your mind. Or, perhaps you look around at the mass consumerism as we launch the holiday season, how shopping overshadows Thanksgiving, and how Christmas gets lost amid the striving after gifts, decorations, food, and all the hype. It may seem this sentence is true! “God is nowhere” to be found!

PP#3: GODISNOWHERE.

GOD IS NOWHERE.

GOD IS NOW HERE!

But take a second look. If you try, you can also read an entirely different sentence here.

[Underline GOD IS NOW HERE.]

“God is now here.” Wow! Same letters, but different spacing gives the sentence the very *opposite* meaning!

There’s a lesson here. We can look around us, and depending on how we look at things, we can see very different realities. Christmas, which can seem so empty and godless with all the commercialism, when we look with *biblical* eyes, is actually the time we proclaim that God now has come right here with us!

And as we come to Thanksgiving, this is exactly what Thanksgiving is all about. It’s to stop and take a second look at your life, seeing a biblical view. You’ve been running, trying to survive, staying ahead of it all. You’ve experienced some hardships, setbacks, frustrations. Your life can seem empty and godless. But Thanksgiving is a time to stop and take a closer look, and to see it all differently. It’s to switch from seeing that God is nowhere in your life, to seeing that God is now here, yes, right here, *in all the struggles and hardships and things that go wrong.*

I make my Confirmation students share God moments each week. I tell them that God is very involved in their lives, doing all kinds of great things. Part of what we need to do as Jesus followers is to start noticing Him, start seeing Him. He’s there! Most of the time we don’t notice!

In the Bible, the act of giving thanks is not just listing the good things we notice and giving thanks for them. It’s a different way of looking at everything, seeing things differently. It’s changing the spacing, and recognizing that God is there, always, and that that is the source of our joy and hope.

PP#4: RESPONSIBILITY

I'm going to try to do one more word play.

[Write out "RESPONSIBILITY"]

Take this one: "RESPONSIBILITY." Usually we see this as rather a heavy word. It brings thoughts of duty, blame, or credit. For example, if right before you eat your Thanksgiving feast, someone says, "Today's dinner is her responsibility." It could mean that it's a failure, and it's her fault. I guess it could also mean that she's a good cook, she's responsible for this success. But, no matter how it turns out, it's a sense of duty: she has make sure there is dinner. Responsibility means being responsible, doing the right thing, taking care of stuff. I use it in my family lectures with words like character and attitude and self-discipline and behaviors. [Point to my family.] I thought I'd get an "amen!" from this section over here on the left on that one!

Well, let's use our biblical super power to see things differently. Now, this actually works better in sound than in print. But see this word differently.

PP#5: RESPONSIBILITY RESPONSE ABILITY

Separating the two root words makes "response" and "ability." And doing this, I think, captures this word as what the Bible means by Thanksgiving. We see this in the ancient, biblical feast of Thanksgiving, the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, called Sukkot. Leviticus 23 explains that the Feast of Tabernacles, or Huts, recalls the tiny huts the Israelites lived in while wandering in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land. They were out there in the desert, eating manna, and depending on God for everything. They were commanded, even after they got to the Promised Land, to gather each year at the time of the harvest to give God thanks for the provision He gave them through the land. God fed them and provided for them. God equipped them with all they needed, and so they were now able to respond by gathering together and giving God thanks. Thankfulness was a response that God made possible.

PP#6: Joel 2:18-29 (CEB)

18 Then the Lord became passionate about this land, and had pity on His people.

19 The Lord responded to the people: See, I am sending you

the corn, new wine, and fresh oil, and you will be fully satisfied by it;

and I will no longer make you a disgrace among the nations. ...

The Lord is about to do great things!

I want to take you deep into the Old Testament. For my thanksgiving Scripture, I want to go to the prophet Joel. Turn to the second chapter. Now, I normally use the first part of this chapter on Ash Wednesday, in the service of repentance. Joel is speaking to the Israelites years after they've been in the Promised Land. They had neglected to give God thanks, and failed to keep Sukkot. They had strayed from God, and God had let their enemies conquer them. So the first part of Joel 2 is a calling for God's people to repent and turn back to God.

Then, Joel proclaims that not due to anything they've done, but simply because of God's character, the Lord looks down on His suffering people, and declares that He will bring restoration and blessing. The wasteland will bring forth harvest again, because God declares it. God will act, and provide for them, again, like He did back in the wilderness. But then, Joel uses this as a launching point to talk about the future, when God will pour out His fullness on His people. On

Pentecost, when Peter sees the Holy Spirit pouring out, he stands up and quotes the end of this chapter of Joel 2 as how God now has fulfilled His promise to pour out His Spirit.

Let's look at the middle part. Pick it up in verse 18. "Then the Lord became passionate about this land, and had pity on His people. The Lord responded to the people: See, I am sending you the corn, new wine, and fresh oil, and you will be fully satisfied by it; and I will no longer make you a disgrace among the nations. ... The Lord is about to do great things!"

Can you hear God proclaiming that because of His love, He will restore life?

PP#7: Joel 2:18-29 (CEB)

- 21 Don't fear, fertile land; rejoice and be glad,
for the Lord is about to do great things!
- 22 Don't be afraid, animals of the field,
for the meadows of the wilderness will turn green;
the tree will bear its fruit;
the fig tree and grapevine will give their full yield.

He then proclaims how the harvest will return to the land, crops and flocks. Verse 21, "Don't fear, fertile land; rejoice and be glad, for the Lord is about to do great things! Don't be afraid, animals of the field, for the meadows of the wilderness will turn green; the tree will bear its fruit; the fig tree and grapevine will give their full yield."

PP#8: Joel 2:18-29 (CEB)

- 23 Children of Zion,
rejoice and be glad in the Lord your God,
because He will give you the early rain as a sign of righteousness;
He will pour down abundant rain for you,
the early and the late rain, as before.
- 24 The threshing floors will be full of grain;
the vats will overflow with new wine and fresh oil.

Verse 23, "Children of Zion, rejoice and be glad in the Lord your God, because He will give you the early rain as a sign of righteousness; He will pour down abundant rain for you, the early and the late rain, as before. The threshing floors will be full of grain; the vats will overflow with new wine and fresh oil."

Can you hear the promises of harvest here? So, when you have harvests, rejoice! Be glad! Give thanks! Sukkot is because of what God does. Most of us here aren't farmers, but we give God thanks, because all we have comes from the ground, and ultimately from God!

PP#9: Joel 2:18-29 (CEB)

- 25 I will repay you for the years that the cutting locust,
the swarming locust, the hopping locust, and the devouring locust have eaten—
my great army, which I sent against you.
- 26 You will eat abundantly and be satisfied,
and you will praise the name of the Lord your God,
who has done wonders for you;
and my people will never again be put to shame.

Then, God promises to restore the losses they have suffered in the past. God will return life and blessing, and make up for what they have lost. Verse 25, “I will repay you for the years that the cutting locust, the swarming locust, the hopping locust, and the devouring locust have eaten—my great army, which I sent against you. [Sometimes our suffering comes from the punishment God sends upon us. But when God punishes, He also restores.] You will eat abundantly and be satisfied, and you will praise the name of the Lord your God, who has done wonders for you; and my people will never again be put to shame.”

PP#10: Joel 2:18-29 (CEB)

- 27 You will know that I am in the midst of Israel,
and that I am the Lord your God—no other exists;
never again will my people be put to shame.
- 28 After that I will pour out my Spirit upon everyone;
your sons and your daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
and your young men will see visions.

Then, God has Joel explain God’s main point. It’s about them knowing that He is their God, That God is with them, and for them. And when they live with Him as their God, they will enjoy His blessings. Verse 27, “You will know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the Lord your God—no other exists; never again will my people be put to shame. After that [switching to now talk about the future] I will pour out my Spirit upon everyone; your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions.”

And this is the verse that Peter preaches on Pentecost. God’s Spirit, which was only given to select people before the time of Jesus, will now be given to *everyone* who chooses to follow Jesus.

This is a harvest passage, a thanksgiving passage. And notice, God’s giving of blessing is not based on anything the people have done or deserve, but simply because of God’s character. And if you read more deeply, you see that it’s not really about material blessings. It’s about them knowing again that He is their God, and choosing Him for their lives. When they do, they receive life, and blessings, and the sufferings they have experienced, He restores back the loss.

PP#11: *Image of the first Thanksgiving*

I drug my family to Massachusetts two Novembers ago, telling them we were on “vacation.” I took them over to Plimouth Plantation, because I wanted them to learn the real history of the Pilgrims who landed there in 1620. They had a recreation of the plantation there, and they told the story of that first American Thanksgiving. I learned this year that Cal Ripley’s ancestors were there! Anyway, the pilgrims landed in November, just as winter was setting in. They had little food, shelter, or provisions. And it was a harsh winter. Many of them got very sick, and of the 102 pilgrims, 45 died that first winter! Almost half! And yet, after all that hardship, those broken families chose to gather to give God thanks when the harvest came in the next fall. Would you do that?

Part of the reason they gathered was to honor the biblical command of Sukkot, “when you have gathered in the crops of the land, you shall celebrate the feast of the Lord for seven days.” (Leviticus 23:34) But they also gathered because, as Jesus followers, they had a different way of seeing things. Things didn’t have to be favorable for them to see God there. Throughout their

hardship and loss, they experienced God with them, right there in their pain. Poor as they were, they saw that God had richly blessed them. God had preserved their foothold in the new land, gave them Native allies, and provided a bountiful harvest for the next winter.

God had given them a *response ability*. And so, they responded in thanksgiving: sharing their tables with each other and the Natives, offering thanks to God for bringing them to a new land—a land full of promise—and being with them every day.

The story of the American Thanksgiving is not about stopping and giving God thanks for all the good things we have, although for sure we need to do that. We should count out all the ways we have above and beyond what we need. When we stop to notice our health, our family, friends, our homes and food, our education, our country, our opportunities, our wealth, we see God has poured out good things on us. But biblical thanksgiving is not just about saying “thank you” for all this. Like the first pilgrims, it’s about responding from our God-given ability to give thanks, when we have little or much, whether we have as much as others or less, whether we have good times or hardships, happiness or sorrow.

God ordered the Israelites, every year, regardless of how their year had been—years of bounty or years of famine, to Sukkot: to stop and give thanks. The pilgrims did it, too.

PP#12: Response-Ability

Thankfulness is not a response to what we have.

Thankfulness is a response to who God is.

There is a deeper understanding of thanksgiving here. Our ancestors in faith - from Sarah to Mary, and from Abraham to Jesus, all were convinced that God is the source of everything, and everything they had—whether little or much—and therefore God had made them able to respond in thanksgiving, for whatever they had.

Do you see it? Thanksgiving is not based on how much you have! You don’t give thanks because you have cool stuff! It’s based on the relationship you have with God: that God has created you, loved you, chosen you, saved you, and gives you this life, and everything in it. It’s not ultimately about what you have, it’s about whose you are! It is a response for being God’s child.

PP#13: Response-Ability

Thankfulness is not a response to what we have.

Thankfulness is a response to who God is.

We have God, who made us able to respond in thankfulness.

We give thanks in order to be in life-giving relationship with God.

God made you with the need to be in connection with Him, and that relationships, when healthy and life-giving, is about us responding in gratitude, and appreciation, and love, and honor, and homage, and worship, and study, and prayer, and blessing, and forgiveness, and good works, and helping, and speaking words of life, and telling others about Jesus, and living as a disciple.

Thanksgiving is not based on what we have or don’t have. It’s based on the very person of God, who we always, *always*, can have! Because we have God, we have the ability to respond in gratitude.

This is what the widow understood in the temple that Andrew taught us two weeks ago. Giving her last two coins was a response that God made her able to give.\

Last week I went to visit Velma Brinker, our oldest member. She will turn 100 at her next birthday. She can no longer hear very well, see very well, she can't read or watch TV, she can't walk anymore, she can't live by herself. And we talked about all this for a while. It's hard, you know, to live with diminishing independence. At one point she said, "I don't know what's taking Jesus so long, I'm ready to go home!" But then, when we got ready to take Holy Communion, she suddenly commented, "Isn't God so good? I am so blessed! Every day I wake up and look out the window from my bed and I say, 'Thank you God for another day.'" And then she said, "I must have something I'm supposed to be doing, because God keeps me here." Then a nurse popped in to be sure she was okay. And the nurse told me how much they all love Velma there. She told me how before Velma lived there, many people were down, and crabby, and difficult. But then Velma started to cheer everyone up. Velma started saying "Thank you" for all the little things. *Now* many people—residents and staff—are saying "thank you" and the mood of the place is so much better. When I looked at Velma, she simply said, "No sense being crabby. Think about good things. Besides, smiles are free."

Now that is what the Bible means when it talks about our thanksgiving response ability.

PP#14: *Image for God giving a grateful heart.*

This week, stop to give God thanks for all the good things you have, and like, and enjoy. You, for your own emotional health, for a healthy attitude, need to do that. Count your blessings.

But also push past that. Push your gratitude beyond what you like, and into who God is. Because you have God, you can see your reality differently. The Israelites saw years of famine as times to give God thanks. The widow saw giving her last two coins as a way to give God thanks. The first pilgrims saw the anniversary of their arrival *for the half who still remained* to give God thanks.

This Thanksgiving is a time we can choose to look at our lives differently, to see God always with us, making us His, giving us the ability to respond, to truly thank God for what He has given us, and to truly trust God for what He will do.

Lord, "Thou that hast given so much to me, give one more thing: a grateful heart." Amen.
Andrew's going to help us all do this, right now. Andrew?

Kid's Lesson & Prayers of Thanksgiving: -Andrew

Closing Song: *Lift High the Name of Jesus* -Sanctify

Memory Verse: -David

James 1:17a "Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above."

Announcements: - David

No! Wednesday meal - Thanksgiving

Benediction: - David