

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN PRO-CATHEDRAL IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA

The Very Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Dean

Scripture:

"What Are You Thankful For?"

THANKSGIVING DAY

I heard a report last night that some stores are rethinking being open on Thanksgiving Day. That's right, some have decided to remain closed today. That comes as a relief for many of their employees – folks who can now spend time with their families. But don't think for a moment that all of these companies are concerned for their workers. It seems that the decision not to open on Thanksgiving was because it turned out that it affected sales on Black Friday – which led to an overall decline in revenue for the weekend.

And yet today, stores like Kmart, Macy's, JC Penny, Walmart and Toys R US will be open. Kmart opening at 6 AM. Kmart? Never did like that store – I say stay away from places that desecrated a sacred day like Thanksgiving.

And I was thinking about what has happened to Thanksgiving; I realized that it was the last sacred holiday to be tainted by Modern American Consumerism. Think about that for a moment – Christmas has been taken over by Santa, Elves, and Reindeer – Jesus is a secondary thought – people buying and selling. All Hallows Eve – All Saints Eve – taken over by Halloween, scary costumes and candy – did you know that Halloween now ranks only behind Christmas in the amount of money spent by Americans for one holiday? And Easter – the Day we celebrate the Resurrection – is about Easter bunnies, chocolate, colored eggs, and ham!

But not Thanksgiving? The day that the Pilgrims gathered together with the Native Americans to give thanks to God for His blessings; the day President George Washington set aside for our nation to remember God's provision for the new republic, the day that became a national holiday by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863 to honor God in the midst of a terrible Civil War - that day – a sacred time for all Americans to gather with their families and to give thanks to God for His blessings on us as individuals, as families, and as a nation. But what happened? The lust for more things, the filthy lucre of American business entered in. And the only reason why it entered in was because of the heart of our citizenry. Not everyone, but enough so that they could be confident that if people would line up for deals in the early hours of Friday right after Thanksgiving, why not just push it forward.

You see, what does it show us? It shows us that there are two choices in life. Two ways. God's or man's. What did we hear Jesus say in our Gospel lesson? – "Don't worry about what you are going to wear or eat, but seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these will be added unto you." God's way is found in His Kingdom. Man's way is found in the world. In God's Kingdom, we are commanded not to worry; in man's world, that is all that people do. They worry about food and fashion. But not so in God's kingdom we are to concern ourselves with the things of God – with truth and righteousness and love. You see, the world is where man and the devil rule. But in God's kingdom? That is where the King of kings and Lord of lords rules. The world reflects the nature of man. God's Kingdom reflects the nature of God. And what is the nature of God our King? He is first and foremost holy – that means that He always does right, He is always just and fair and holds us accountable. Second, He is loving – that means He has our best in mind; He wants us to succeed, He wants us to do well, He wants to give us second chances, He wants us to experience His goodness. And finally, He is the God of Truth. He is ultimate reality; there is no falsehood in Him. And to know God is to know Jesus and to know Jesus is to

know God. In fact, Jesus said it when He said in **Jn. 14:6**, "*I am the Way, and the Truth and the Life, no one comes to the Father except through Me.*" But then do you know what He said in v. 7? *If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him.*"

To see Jesus is to see God. And to follow Jesus is to enter the Kingdom of God. But now how do we experience the Kingdom? There are many ways, but I just want to talk about one this morning. Giving thanks – that's right. When we give thanks, we are experiencing the Kingdom of God.

Why do you think we heard the Apostle Paul say in our second reading from **Philippians 4:**, "*Be anxious for nothing but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.* He even made simpler in **1 Thess. 5:18** – *In everything give thanks. for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.* That's right, in everything, in everything give thanks."

WHO DO YOU THANK?

Wow. What does that mean? How can you give thanks in everything? The only way you can do that is if you know to whom to give thanks in the first place. I mean, think about it for a moment. Who gave you your body, who gave you your brain, your heart, every organ in your body. Who gave you a mind to think, create and reason? Who gave you your family – a mom and a dad? Who gave you the capacity to love and to do good? Who gave you the ability to breath? Who gave you the Sun, and the moon, and the rain, and the plants and the animal kingdom? Everything you need to live on this planet we call earth?

I wonder to whom the atheists and agnostics give thanks? Whom are you thanking? The government? Your family? I know some school textbooks said that the Pilgrims gave thanks to the Natives – really? Wrong! We give thanks to God because while there is nothing wrong for thanking people for what they do in your life and for who they are, the reality is there is so much in this life that no one is responsible for except for God.

And as Christians, we not only thank God for Who He is as our Creator, as our Father, but we give thanks for the new life He gives us in His Son, Jesus Christ. We give thanks for forgiveness, for reconciliation. For His personal presence in the Holy Spirit whom we can't see but Who lives in us nonetheless. We give thanks for eternal life!

GIVING THANKS IS A CHOICE

But it is not enough to understand from whom all our blessings come; giving thanks is a choice. I like what Channel 2 News has been showing this week. They show a picture of the world from the atmosphere and then have the words. You can look down upon the world and see all that is going on and be miserable, or you can look at it and be thankful. You see, I can give thanks to God knowing that He has my back; and although I don't know how it is all going to work out, I know it will work out. **Romans 8:28** – *For we know that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called to His purpose.* What is His purpose? The Kingdom. The Kingdom is God reflects God, and so we give thanks to Him for the good which ultimately reflects the Kingdom. That means we make a conscious decision to give thanks. How do you do that? You do that by actually thanking God with your lips, in your heart and with others, like we are doing today. You see, when we do that, it helps us keep perspective. It helps us see that things are really not so bad.

When people are going through a hard time or are overwhelmed, do you know what I tell them to do? Look at the good that has gone on in your life, look at the good that you now have, and be thankful for those things and then move forward addressing those areas that are causing doubt and depression. You see,

when we give thanks, we are getting our eyes off our negative circumstances and putting them on our positive circumstances; but more importantly we are going beyond our circumstances and directing our eyes upon the Lord! That's exactly what the psalmist does in **Psalm 136**. He proclaims:

Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good, For His lovingkindness is everlasting 2Give thanks to the God of gods, For His lovingkindness is everlasting. 3Give thanks to the Lord of lords, For His lovingkindness is everlasting; 4To Him who alone does great wonders, For His lovingkindness is everlasting; 5To Him who made the heavens with skill, For His lovingkindness is everlasting; 6To Him who spread out the earth above the waters, For His lovingkindness is everlasting; 7To Him who made the great lights, For His lovingkindness is everlasting; 8The sun to rule by day, For His lovingkindness is everlasting, 9The moon and stars to rule by night, For His lovingkindness is everlasting. 10To Him who smote the Egyptians in their firstborn, For His lovingkindness is everlasting...

What is the psalmist doing? He is giving thanks to the Lord for all the good He has done! Notice how many times God's love is declared. Some believe wrongly that the God of the Old Testament is a vengeful, angry God; that somehow He is not like Jesus. But that is not the case. God is the same-yesterday, today, and tomorrow. He is holy and just but He is also loving. If we are to grow in that love, we need to look at how He has loved us. And when we do so, it will give us grateful hearts!

So do you want to build your faith? Do you want your love for the Lord to grow? Take some time and write down all the things you are thankful for; and when you do, you will see how much God has truly blessed you.

GIVING THANKS ALWAYS RESULTS IN TWO BLESSINGS

It also keeps us humble. The grateful heart is a humble heart. Gratefulness and humility go hand in hand. Think about it for a moment - a humble person knows that he or she doesn't deserve anything, so they are thankful for even the smallest of blessings.

But when people are ungrateful, they think they deserve all the good that is coming their way. They get an entitled mentality. They are like, "Hey, I not only deserve better, I want better!" And so the ungrateful person is cynical, negative, and critical.

I don't believe that there's any other sin quite like the sin of ingratitude. Shakespeare said, "*How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child.*" For those of us who have loved and labored and invested much in the health and lives of our children, we know there is nothing worse than when our children do not seem to appreciate or to be thankful for the sacrifices that parents have made. Milton, the blind poet, said that a person with an ungrateful spirit only has one vice; he said because all of the rest of his vices are virtues compared to ingratitude. Every other sin is a virtue compared to the sin of ingratitude.

No, to give thanks is to check the sin of pride. James reminds us in **James 4:6** – "**God opposes the proud, but give grace to the humble.**" But the grateful heart recognizes **Rom. 8:31**: "**If God is for us who can be against us?**"

And I will tell you what else will happen when we give thanks in our hearts – it will translate into giving to others. You see, when you understand that God has given you so much and you don't deserve it all, it should move you to give to others – to be a blessing as you have been blessed! Isn't that what God promised Abraham in **Gen 12:1-3**. God said I will bless you and you will be a blessing to others. That is one of the reasons God blesses us. He doesn't bless us so that we keep it all to ourselves. What is love all about – giving of yourself to another- Give your time, your attention, your talent, your treasure all for

Thanksgiving Day, November 24 2016, Liturgical Year "C"

others, When we give thanks to God, we can show our gratitude by giving back to Him and to our neighbor.

So today as we gather with family and friends, as we stuff ourselves so much that we become "couch potatoes" and our children become "tater tots." Let us not merely gobble till we wobble, but rather let us truly in everything give thanks, for this is God's will for you and is one way to seek first His Kingdom. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!