

Thanksgiving Day, Thursday, November 26, 2009
ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY
The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. +

"A Godly Heart Is a Grateful Heart"

OUR FIRST THANKSGIVING

I don't know if you realize it or not but we are coming upon the one year anniversary of being in our new building. Hard to believe it has been almost a year. And I think it is fitting that the last major holy day that we are celebrating in our new place is Thanksgiving. How appropriate! We have seen so many examples of how the transition from the Episcopal Church and our old building to a new Bible believing Anglican Church and a new location has been the work of the Lord. God's fingerprints are all over it. And Thanksgiving coming at the end of our first year is yet, another example. You could not have planned it more perfectly.

As a Body of Christ, we indeed have so much to be thankful for. I want to list just some of the things:

- 1) A place of worship less than a mile from our previous location
- 2) a facility and grounds purchased for only 60% of its asking price.
- 3) a unanimous and effective clergy team
- 4) a unanimous and effective wardens and vestry
- 5) a committed congregation - all things needed for move donated; great volunteer support.
- 6) a growing congregation
- 7) a successful beginning to the *Let Us Arise and Build* Mission Initiative
- 8) visits by our bishops four times plus two confirmations
- 9) presence of our first rector, Fr. Amend
- 10) presence of long-time priest and member Fr. Montanari
- 11) visibility among and support by WNY Christian Community
- 12) many gatherings for fellowship, food and special events
- 13) a double rainbow over the church on Saturday August 21 near end of our first RRR at new place.
- 14) many maintenance needs and renovations completed and underway.

You know at the end of their first year in the New World, the Pilgrims gathered together to give thanks to Almighty God. They didn't have it as good as we do today. Even though death had claimed 50 of 102 people during the previous year, they still gave thanks to God. Some school textbooks say that they did it to thank the Native Americans. No doubt they invited the Indians to show their appreciation for their help. Remember Squanto? But the Lord was the main reason for why they gave thanks.

The truth is a godly heart is a grateful heart. And it is a grateful heart that will enable us to experience the joy and peace of the Lord and it will increase our faith

ONE OF LIFE'S KEYS

Please turn with me in your pew Bibles to **1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**. St. Paul says: ***"Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."*** Do you want to know the will of God for your life? St. Paul just summed it up. *In everything* give thanks, not *for* everything, but in everything. Doesn't matter if you are on the mountaintop of victory or

in the valley of defeat, whether you're material rich or dirt poor, in the epitome of good health or terribly sick, Paul says *in everything* give thanks.

The Apostle Paul also wrote in **Philippians 4:6-7**: "*Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God and the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*"

Now Paul just didn't say these words to sound spiritual, he lived them. While he was in prison he wrote to the Christians living in the Greek city of Philippi. Do you know what he said while incarcerated? **Philippians 4:11-12**: "*For I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.*" Doesn't matter if he is eating with the King or stuck in prison, Paul is content. Wow. Why was he able to say such things? He had a grateful heart. Why did he have a grateful heart? He recognized that God is good and that when we are on God's side good things happen.

GOD'S BLESSINGS

How about the Apostle James? What did he say concerning the good that comes from God? We heard it in our first lesson. **James 1:17**: "*Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.*" Good coming down from God is even more certain than the sunrise and sunset. And this good takes on the form of physical blessings. Doesn't matter if you are good or bad, God blesses us with physical blessings.

For example, God has made the physical universe. In **Genesis 1** we are told that God spoke and it was so. God made the physical universe out of nothing. And God saw all that He had made and "*indeed, it was very good.*" Doesn't matter if you believe God or not, all can see His creation. **Ps. 19:1** says "*The heavens tell of the glory of God; their expanse declares His handiwork.*"

God has also made the human body. **Ps. 139:13-14** declares "*For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*" You and I had nothing to do with our bodies. God made them with all their organs to work in unison as one. They are incredible creations. And God provides for His creation and God provides for our bodies.

God has made us in His image. **Genesis 1:22** – *In the image of God, He made them, male and female He made them.*" This means that God has given us the capacity to know and communicate with Him. We have a mind, emotions, a will, and a spirit. All of these capacities enable us to know and communicate with our Creator. In other words, we can have a relationship with the One who created us.

Now why did He do all this? Listen for a moment to **Psalms 136:1** "*O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.*" He did it out of His great eternal love for us.

And when we start to see His love, we will start to see beyond merely the physical blessings of life. For when we turn to the Living God, we will receive not just physical blessings but spiritual blessings. And these spiritual blessings all come from a relationship with Jesus Christ. **Eph. 1:3**: "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.*"

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What are these spiritual blessings? God forgives us when we do wrong. He doesn't hold it all against us. **Colossians 1:13-14** says ***“For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His Beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”*** How do we really know that God loves us? By virtue of what Christ did for us in coming to this earth and dying on the cross for the sins of the world.

Not only does God forgive us in Christ, He sustains us. **Colossians 1:17:** ***“In Christ, all things hold together.”*** Not only does God sustain us in Christ, but God lives in us. Jesus said that He would not leave us as orphans but would send us the Holy Spirit to live in us. **(Jn.14:16-18).**

Not only does God live in us through the Holy Spirit, He promises to never leave us. Jesus said, ***“And remember, I am with you always even to the end of the age.”*** **(Mt. 28:20).**

And so we shouldn't be surprised that God promises eternal life to us as well! Jesus said, ***“I am the resurrection and I am the life, everyone who believes in Me shall live, even though he die, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die.”*** **(Jn. 11:25-26)** St. Paul wrote, ***“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.”*** **(Rom. 6:23).**

You see all spiritual blessings are realized in our Lord Jesus Christ and no one else. That's why Paul says in that same Philippians passage we quoted earlier: ***“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”*** **(Philippians 4:13).**

The truth is we have nothing to do with our existence. And we have nothing to do with our salvation. It is a free gift that is to be received with a thank you. So when we are in Christ, we not only have physical blessings, we have spiritual blessings. And it is the spiritual blessings that can never be taken away from us, for the spiritual blessings are eternal, but the physical blessings are passing away.

The truth is it's easy for us to forget about the spiritual blessings when we have so many of life's physical blessings – food, clothing and shelter and family. And then when those physical blessings are threatened, if we are not careful we can fall into the trap of thinking all is lost when the fact remains that we actually already have all the spiritual blessings of our Father in heaven through Jesus Christ! And the power of the Holy Spirit to transform any deficiency into an abundance!

GIVING THANKS IN GOOD TIMES AND BAD

That's why Christians throughout the ages have been able to still say thank you Lord even in the most difficult days. Right after the stock market crashed in 1929, a group of pastors in the Northeast, all graduates of the Boston School of Theology, gathered to discuss how they should conduct their Thanksgiving Sunday services.

Things were about as bad as they could get, and there was no sign of relief on the way. The bread lines were long, millions were out of work, and the term Great Depression seemed an apt description for the mood of the country. The pastors thought they should only lightly touch upon the subject of thanksgiving due to the human misery all around them. But it was Dr. William L. Stiger, pastor of a large congregation in the city, who rallied the group. He said this was not the time to give mere passing mention to Thanksgiving, just the opposite. This was the time for the nation to get matters in perspective and thank God for blessings always present, but perhaps overlooked due to the present hardship.

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You see Dr. Stiger recognized an important truth when it comes to being thankful. The most intense moments of thankfulness are not found in times of plenty, but when difficulties abound. I mean, think of the Pilgrims that first Thanksgiving, half their number dead, alone in a new land, but they still were taking time to thank God. Their gratitude was not for something but in someone. It was that same sense of gratitude that lead Abraham Lincoln to formally establish the first Thanksgiving Day in the midst of national civil war, when the horrible list of casualties seemed to go on and on, and our very nation struggled for its survival. It was that same sense of gratitude that enabled St. Paul languishing in a prison cell in Rome to still be thankful. You realize what you do have when the physical blessings are taken away. And what we do have in the Lord Jesus Christ is something far greater than any created thing.

THE BLESSING OF A GRATEFUL HEART

Now having talked about the blessings God has bestowed upon us, and how they are realized in Jesus Christ, I want to say what else is true of a grateful heart. A grateful heart not only recognizes the blessings we have in the Lord, it will use those blessings to bless others.

James1:16-17 says, *Be doers of the Word, not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act they will be blessed in their doing.*

In other words, if you are really thankful to God, you're going to be a doer not merely a hearer of God's Word. Remember Abraham? God said to him in **Genesis 12**, *"I am going to bless you and you're going to be a blessing to many nations."* Abraham responded in faith, he obeyed God, and look how God used Abraham, so much so that Abraham's faith is blessing us today. He is held up over and over again in the Bible as an example for us to follow. It was through his physical offspring that Jesus Christ was born. Abraham put his faith in God's faithfulness, and he received the blessings of God and went on to bless others.

Do you want to know what life is all about? God blesses us so that we are a blessing to others. We're to give back to God as an expression of thanks for all that He has given to us. And that means giving of our time, our talent, and our treasure to help others and to honor the Lord.

Do you have a grateful heart? Do you want to have a thankful heart? Remember what God has done for you through Jesus Christ; how you have been blessed with all the spiritual blessings, and use those blessing to bless others for God's glory. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. AMEN!