

Thanksgiving Eve '09
A Community Service at
St. Andrew's Roman Catholic Church
Annapolis

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

There was once an old Quaker farmer who would never take the Lord's name in vain. But one day, when he slapped the mule's reins to get him moving, the mule wouldn't budge. The farmer tried everything: coaxing, cajoling, even pleading – all without success. Finally, he reached the end of his rope.

"Mule," he said in a quiet voice, "thee knows that, because of my religion, I cannot beat thee, or curse thee, or abuse thee in any way. But mule," he continued, "what thee doesn't know is that I can sell thee to an Episcopalian."

We Episcopalians are an odd lot. We've been called "God's frozen people"... and a lot worse! With one foot firmly on catholic ground and the other in the Protestant camp, we often suffer from identity crisis. Oh, we love being Anglican. It's just that we wish we could get people to worship as faithfully as the Roman Catholics, tithe like the Baptists, sing like the Lutherans, organize things like the Presbyterians, administrate like the Methodists, observe holy days like the Muslims, while keeping traditions like the Jews!

I very much appreciate the opportunity to be with you all tonight and to reflect on this Thanksgiving. Last year at this time, my husband Bill and I had planned to have our Thanksgiving meal with dear friends, as we had done for several years. But after what was supposed to be a serious but fairly routine surgery and one week in the hospital, he had developed complications and was still in the hospital on Thanksgiving Day. One week turned into five months and five days. Without going into the details, let me just say that he is a walking miracle. We are exquisitely aware of how much we have to be grateful for.

But that is our personal story, and the holiday we call Thanks-giving is about much more than that. Its history goes back to harvest festivals in Europe, brought to the Americas by colonists. And whether it started with the Plymouth colony in 1621 as most of us learned in elementary school, or by the Spanish in St. Augustine in 1565 as some believe, it was a community event. Although it seems to have always had a religious orientation – one of

giving thanks to the Creator – it was not primarily a church event, but one of the home and hearth.

So we gather tonight here in this church to offer thanks to God for the many blessings we enjoy. But tomorrow we will be in our homes with family and friends, where the traditions of Thanksgiving originated at tables laden with food.

At our table, when we offer a prayer of thanks for our food, a line we almost always add is, “Make us mindful of the needs of others.” That seems particularly poignant at a time like Thanksgiving, doesn’t it, knowing as we all do, that our bounty stands in stark contrast to the needs of others.

I am reminded of my favorite line in all of English literature: the opening line of Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities. “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.”

It refers, of course, to the contrast between (among other things) the flourishing English economy and the grotesque economic imbalance in France; between the terrible capacity of human beings to do evil, and the magnificence of human love and sacrifice.

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.

I suppose it catches my imagination because it describes something basic about the human experience, both individually and collectively. It certainly describes any number of current contrasts.

- Never before have we had such amazing medical interventions at our disposal – everything from heart transplants to miraculous drugs – and never before have so many died of easily preventable diseases such as dysentery.
- Never before have there been so many goods and services available – everything from cell phones to intercontinental travel – and never before have we been in such debt or seen the world economy come so close to collapse.
- Never before have we been able to see our own planet from outer space; and never have we human beings brought it so close to devastation.
- Never before have we had the resources to provide enough food for the whole world, and yet a child dies of starvation every five seconds.
- Never before have we had a greater need for peace, or a greater capacity for destruction.

In so many ways, it is the best of times and the worst of times. How then do we give thanks with integrity in the face of such knowledge? Because if Thanksgiving is only about being thankful for our good fortune, it is an empty gesture at best, and an affront to God at worst.

For our thankfulness to have integrity, it must translate into how we live and how we love.

We Americans, who have independence and self-reliance in our DNA, have a hard time understanding that we human beings are all deeply connected and related, let alone our total dependence on God. And yet, these two things – our need for each other and for God – are essential if our thankfulness is to translate into how we live and how we love.

A 6th century teacher named Dorotheos (of Gaza) listened to the complaints of his fellow monks who said that they couldn't properly love God because they had to put up with one another's irritating presence. Dorotheos responded by describing the world to them as a giant wheel; a great circle the center of which is God. The outer circumference, he said, is humankind.

Now imagine, he said, that there are straight lines to God, like spokes in a wheel. To move toward God, we grow closer to each other. And there is no way to approach other people without getting closer to God as well.

So here is my hope for us all tonight: that we go from this service of prayer and song and fellowship with thanksgiving that will translate into how we live and how we love. And tomorrow, at all the tables at which we will gather and give thanks, may we be mindful of the needs of others. May we ourselves and this precious earth itself be transformed by that mindfulness.

Amen.

lml+