

Gratitude – For Such a Time as This

Hope Valley Baptist Church

November 19, 2006

Esther 4:11-16

This week we celebrate Thanksgiving. When you think of Thanksgiving what comes to mind?

- The first thanksgiving with the Native Americans & the Pilgrims
- Getting together with family – parents, g'parents, children, etc.
- Traveling
- FOOD – turkey & dressing
- Football Games
- Other traditions – raking the yard
- Pausing to thank God for our blessings and for helping us to survive our struggles.

Sometimes as we go through struggles in life such as sickness, loss of a job, a broken relationship or the death of a loved one, seasons like Thanksgiving can be really hard. I want you to also realize that Thanksgiving can relate to being thankful to God for strength to get through it.

That is a big part of what that first thanksgiving was all about. *Peter Gnomes, a Harvard Theologian, stated, “thanksgiving is not about bounty at all; it is about survival.” He goes on to share that the first Thanksgiving feast began with five kernels of corn at each setting. That was a grim reminder of the hardships of the previous winter. The pilgrim leaders wanted to keep alive the memory of their hardships and their sacrifices. They did not want their descendents to forget that at the day their ration was reduced to five grains of corn only seven healthy colonist remained to nurse the sick and nearly half of their group had died.*

“Thanksgiving is about remembering when you came to the brink & almost fell over it. When you are still standing that is the time to be truly thankful.”

When we are down – way down sometimes our focus is to just stay down, but we must look up to God for direction, for strength & thank God as He helps us along. That first Thanksgiving observance almost didn't happen. Early on the colonist had many hardships and they would on occasion come together to pray & fast seeking God's aid in their struggles. As they were discussing having another such day, one colonist remarked, “We have brooded over our difficulties long enough. It's time to consider some of our mercies; the colony is growing strong, the fields are increasing in harvest, the rivers are full of fish, the woods are full of game.” The others agreed and began to prepare a Thanksgiving celebration. A feast that began with 5 kernels of corn to remember how they had survived such a bleak period.

So thanksgiving is about surviving the difficulties in life and being able to keep on going & it is about be thankful for our blessings. (One of the songs that we sang earlier

was) Count Your Blessings. It is a song about when things are tough & all you see is what is going wrong – count your blessings. Whether you are going through struggles or not, it is great to take time to count your blessings.

So let's think what are some of your blessings in life:

- Family
- Relationship with God
- Church
- Material Blessings
- Friends
- Job

What are you going to do with your blessings? 1st of all we are to be grateful for them. Appreciate your blessings. Brian McLaren, who is a writer, pastor & speaker, has shared about the importance of being contemplative. That can include different things, but he specifically talks about focusing on God all around us. He tells of a specific time that he was walking in a park & having such a worship experience seeing God in all that he had created. He said “an ecstasy overcame him that he can't describe. . . . exuberant joy of simply seeing these masterpieces of God's creation.

He then compares that to the tragedy of consumerism. We keep acquiring more and more things without taking the time to truly enjoy things. We have without truly having. There can be a joy in having good things, but we miss the joy when we don't appreciate things & just want more. (McLaren: Generous Orthodoxy, 178-180)

It is not just about material things. We get so busy that we don't enjoy our experiences. We don't enjoy our blessings, because we are looking at someone else and feeling that they are more blessed than we are.

We need to begin by being appreciative of our blessings. We need to take time to really experience these blessings.

Then we can ask – what else can I do with my blessings? – appreciate it & . . . express our gratitude in our actions. If you are thankful for a relationship, work to build that relationship – with your spouse, with your children, with your parents, with your friends.

If you grateful for your relationship with God, work to build that relationship and serve God as best you can.

If you are thankful for your job, or it could be just thankful to have a job, be the best employee you can be.

Perhaps you realize that you need God in your life & that this is a gift for which you should be thankful. The gift is that the God of the universe loves you. This God

created you. He came to live on earth. He died for you & was resurrected. He wants to have a relationship with you. If you are grateful, accept his gift of salvation.

Also as we accept God's gift of salvation & have a relationship with God, if you are grateful you need to share what you have with others. If God is making a difference in your life, let others know, so they too can experience God in their lives.

What about our financial blessings? We are to realize that compared to others in the world we are really blessed. I don't know why but we are.

This past week I got an email from the one campaign. This is a campaign to help fight AIDS and extreme poverty. It suggest having an oxfam meal - The idea is pretty simple. **If 20 people sit down at your table, representing the world's population, three would get a gourmet meal, five would get rice and beans, and 12 would receive a small portion of rice.** The true power of a Hunger Banquet is that as you eat your meal, unlike the real world, you see what's on everyone else's plate. That is pretty powerful.

That also reminded me of a Bible study that I was a part of several years ago while I was serving a former church. The youth were going to camp. The camp had sent information to lead this Bible study to prepare for the week. The youth leader was asked to have pennies that were enough for one – two per person. She was to throw them out and instruct the youth to get what they wanted. Well she did that & some of the guys went wild. They were pushing & grabbing & some had lots of pennies. Some only got one & some didn't get any. She then said that represents the distribution of wealth in our world. There is enough for everyone, but not everyone gets an equal amount.

About a month ago we did a 2 week study on Wed night entitled Hope & Action focusing on AIDS & HIV in Africa, Lynne Hybels states, "We get to be part of God's plan to heal, rebuild, restore, and redeem this broken world. This has nothing to do with guilt, or duty, or with a have-to. **This is something we get to do.**"

We have been blessed & we can use our blessings to help others.

I want to share a story about a woman who received a blessing & decided that she could use her blessing to make a difference for others. It is from the Old Testament book of Esther. Let me begin with a brief background.

King Ahasuerus threw a big party to show off his wealth. The party went on for about 6 months. He sent for his wife Queen Vashti to come before a bunch of drunken men to show her beauty. She refused to do so. The King was upset and was unsure what to do. After consulting with his advisors he decided that Queen Vashti should never come before him again. A statement needed to be made or else, they reasoned, women throughout the region will rebel against their husbands.

Then the King had a beauty pageant of sorts to chose a Queen to replace Queen Vashti. He chose Esther. Esther was a Jew. Her parents had died and she had been raised

by her cousin Mordecai. Later, the King promoted Haman to be second in power throughout the region and ordered that everyone should bow down to him. Mordecai refused to do that. This is probably because Mordecai was a Jew and this would be equated with emperor worship. Haman is so upset that he request of the King to have all the Jews killed. The King agrees and sends out a decree. Mordecai learns of this and sends word to Esther. He ask her to go before the king on behalf of the Jewish people.

Her initial response is to say that she cannot do this. If she goes before the king without first being called for she could be executed. That seems strange to us, but that was the law. And rarely would anyone approach the King without first being summonsed. A person would be spared if the king lifted his royal scepter out to them.

Mordecai responded, "If all the Jews are killed you too will be killed. Deliverance will come eventually from another quarter, but you & your father's family will perish." It is interesting that in the book of Esther the name God is never used. But here it seems evident that Mordecai believes that God will deliver the Jews in the end. "Deliverance will come from another quarter" but it will be too late for you & your family.

14b- he further states "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." You have been blessed in way that you can be a great blessing to others.

Esther sends word back to Mordecai to gather Jewish people to gather and fast for 3 days. She adds that she and her maids will also fast for 3 days. Then she will go before the king. If I die, I die.

This is an important action that is often overlooked. Before Esther went before the King many people had been in prayer and fasting for 3 days. It is important to earnestly pray before we take a step of faith and when we are seeking direction in life.

Esther did approach the King. He held out his royal scepter to spare her life. She requested that the King and Haman join her for a banquet she had prepared. At the banquet she requested that the two of them join her for another banquet the next day. At this second banquet she ask the king to spare her life and the life of her people. And eventually her actions did spare the life of the Jews.

The book of Esther is a great book I encourage you to read it this week so you can have a better appreciation of it.

It was a courageous act for Esther to go before the King but as Mordecai had stated, "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

Esther had been blessed. She was raised by her uncle after her parents had died. She was unlikely choice for a queen, but she had become a queen. She lived a life of luxury. She could even have influence over the king. When others needed her to take action, she did. She wasn't just concerned about herself & wanting more for herself, she used her blessing & her position to make a difference for many other people.

Conclusion

Esther is not a typical thanksgiving story, but I think it fits. There was a desperate situation & they overcame it. There was a person that was blessed & she used her blessing to bless others.

This Thanksgiving, I want you to first of all reflect on how God has given you strength to overcome an obstacle. Then take time to be contemplative – focus on God, see God all around you and really have your blessings.

Then ask how can I use my blessings or use what I have overcome for others. We are a blessed country & we do some good things, but we could do so much more. Our federal budget includes about $\frac{3}{4}$ of 1 % for global poverty & disease. If we added one percent it would be amazing what could be accomplished. I think that type of effort could also help in the fight on terror. As people see us helping the hungry & those with AIDS then I think it will make a difference.

We can support our government to do more, but what can you do with what you have – your blessings. You may say I don't have that much. Remember what Jesus said about the widow's mite. A lady gave out of her poverty & Jesus said it was a tremendous gift. Allow your blessings to be a blessing to others.

- relationships, salvation, \$, overcoming tragedies . . . etc.