

Thanksgiving Day  
November 28, 2013  
The Rev. Robert H. Malm

## Thanksgiving Is Freedom

Thanksgiving and freedom are themes woven together in many of St. Paul's letters. Paul encourages the Thessalonians to give thanks always and "*in all circumstances.*" (5:18) He writes to the Galatians, "*For freedom Christ has set us free...*" (5:1) In his letter to the Romans, we read, "*...The spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death...*" (8:2).

Paul had found freedom in knowing God's love in Jesus Christ. Paul preached this message of freedom with thanksgiving for God's amazing grace. Yet in every period of history Christians have been challenged to offer thanksgiving to God while experiencing the reality of political, economic, emotional and spiritual freedom.

We keep this Thanksgiving feast day in part because of the Pilgrims who came to America seeking religious freedom. How horribly paradoxical that the Native Americans who helped the Pilgrims to survive their first winter, and, then, celebrated with the Pilgrims in November of 1621, were within a generation or two driven from their native lands and slaughtered when they resisted.

We keep this Thanksgiving holiday in very large part because President Lincoln decided 150 years ago, on October 3, 1863, that Thanksgiving should be a national, a Federal holiday. Lincoln did not want each individual state to decide if or when to celebrate Thanksgiving Day. So 74 years after our first President, George Washington, proclaimed the need for a Thanksgiving holiday, Lincoln made it official.

Of course 1863 was quite a year! In January Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing those held in slavery. In July at Gettysburg, the Union Army won a decisive victory and Lincoln began to hope for and to plan for an end to the Civil War. Just weeks before his famous Gettysburg Address, Lincoln issued his Proclamation of the Thanksgiving holiday. Thanksgiving with freedom has always guided our nation into the future.

The Book of Deuteronomy is the story of ancient Israel's journey through the wilderness to freedom in the Promised Land. Moses calls Israel to remember "*the long way that the Lord has led you these 40 years...*" But so much of the Old Testament tells us how the people forgot God's faithfulness. Israel turned from trusting in God to trying to trust in kings, in politics, in foreign alliances, in the quest for power.

Jesus used the Exodus story and, specifically the Passover celebration at the Last Supper, to share a new reality of thanksgiving and freedom – the Body and Blood of Christ in the Holy Communion. The word Eucharist means thanksgiving.

Jesus realized how hard it would be for his disciples to live under the political oppression of Rome. Thanksgiving and freedom don't come easy in any age. Jesus' teachings, summarized by St. Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount, call us away from whatever causes us to be anxious.

Most of us are not really anxious about food, drink, or clothes (even on this day). Our anxieties are more complex, more emotional, more spiritual. We worry about security, about money, about material possessions; we worry about our health, our relationships, our families and friends; we worry about our work, our jobs, our future, whether we will find a meaningful career.

The Gospel for Thanksgiving Day asks us to consider how we worry, what causes stress, when do we grow anxious? Jesus and Paul encourage us to move from a place of anxiety to a place where we can give thanks. As we make this pilgrimage from anxiety to thanksgiving, we will find freedom – emotional and spiritual freedom.

This holy day is all about giving thanks and experiencing freedom. Ancient Israel, the first disciples, those who came to this land in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and those who keep coming now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century all seek freedom. For you and for me, we seek freedom as we deal with the challenges, the hopes and the fears of our lives.

After deciding upon my title and subject for this sermon, I read a short meditation written by Father Daniel Heischman. Father Heischman is the Executive Director of the National Association of Episcopal Schools. He has visited and preached here at Grace and he sends out a weekly meditation to schools and parishes.

His meditation for this week is titled, "Thank God, We're Free." He writes:

*Thanking God becomes a moment when, no matter how bound we are by restriction, worry, or anxiety, we are able to rise above the here and now and find our ultimate freedom in God.*

*Perhaps that is why, through the years, one of the most amazing things I have learned about human beings is that many of the most thankful people I have ever encountered are those who have endured great hardship.*

*...by simply thanking God we may well be setting ourselves on a path to being free.*

Let us thank God for life, for love, for the opportunities we are given; let us thank God even for our struggles, our times in the wilderness, our hardships. Let us always remember "The Great Thanksgiving" we share in the Holy Eucharist and the gifts of grace we receive through faith in Jesus Christ Our Lord. When we give thanks to God we truly worship in spirit and in truth. Jesus told us, "The truth will make you free..." (John 8:32).

Deuteronomy 8:1-3, 6-10

Psalm 65:9-14

James 1:17-18, 21-27

Matthew 6:25-33