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Our Saviour/St. Stephens
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Thanksgiving Service

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

So, sisters and brothers in Christ, this week we celebrate in our American society what is perhaps the holiest holiday on the calendar.

That holiday, that “holy” day, being Thanksgiving.

Now, why do I say that?

Why do I say Thanksgiving is the holiest holiday?

I mean, it is not Easter nor Christmas.

And, it is not Yom Kippur nor Rosh Hashanah.

And, it is not Ramadan.

And so, why, why do I consider Thanksgiving to be so profoundly holy?

Why do I consider Thanksgiving to be so sacred?

Well, for a number of reasons.

First and foremost, it is a holiday that is not specific to any particular group of people, except to all the people living here in our country.

Neither Jews, nor Muslims, nor Buddhists, nor Hindus, nor Christians, whether they are Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, you name it...

No particular religious group can claim a monopoly on Thanksgiving.

Nor can any particular ethnic group nor race.

No, the thing about Thanksgiving is that it is a universal holiday, something we all can celebrate. That’s the first point.

PAUSE

And furthermore, the message of thanksgiving is simple.

We give pause in our every day lives so that we might come together and give “thanks.”

Now yes, some might give thanks to their God for all their blessings...

...while others might offer a general word of thanks, not to any specific god or deity...

...and still others might offer a word of thanks to particular persons, for whom they are thankful.

“Thank you, Mom and Dad, for your care of me.”

“Thank you, Wife or Husband, for your love.”

“Thank you, Friend, for your presence in my life.”

Regardless of how or to whom we express our thanks, to give thanks is in my humble opinion really what all of life is to be about.

Because to give thanks acknowledges that we can't do it all alone.

No, to give thanks acknowledges we need help and support and care from whatever the source.

So to give thanks then is to be humble.

And again, this is a profoundly holy experience, to express humility, to acknowledge our thanks, to say I can't do it alone.

I need support and care from outside myself.

And so to give thanks is a great theme for a holiday, maybe the very best of all themes.

And of all the holidays out there, Thanksgiving captures this simple but profound message.

PAUSE

And then, of course, there is the food, right?

I mean, what is Thanksgiving without all the food?

Turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, corn, green bean casserole, cranberry sauce, and pumpkin pie, or apple pie.

I know, I'm making you hungry. I'm making myself hungry.

But, the food is only part of what makes a meal a meal.

For there is something holy about stopping everything else that we are doing to come together with friends and family and loved ones...

There is something holy about stopping everything else and sitting down across from people to break bread...

There is something holy about seeing other people's faces across a table, and nourishing our bodies with food, as we nourish our spirits with conversation with other people.

There is something holy about sharing in fellowship with others across a table.

Life gets so busy, and so it is a good thing then that our stomachs force us to stop.

We need meals to force us to engage other people in a relaxed way.

Meals are holy experiences.

And it is no wonder then that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper as part of our routine as Christian people.

No doubt Jesus knew how special, how holy meals are.

PAUSE

Indeed, we probably take for granted the power of meals.

I once heard it said, for instance, that the number one contributing factor to the success of a young person, however we might define "success..."

I heard it said somewhere, I can't remember where now, but that the number one factor for the success of a child is whether that child's family sat down at least once a day to share a meal.

Interesting, isn't it? Sharing a daily meal with one's family translates into success in life.

And, so, yes...there is something holy, something powerful about meals.

And there is something wonderful about Thanksgiving Day when our society stops what it is doing to gather for a meal together.

These then are the several reasons I would list to make the case that of all the days on the calendar Thanksgiving is the most holy of them all.

Thanksgiving is a universal holiday. Thanksgiving is about that great message—giving thanks. And Thanksgiving focuses on a meal.

PAUSE

Now, in ancient times, giving thanks was also incredibly important in daily life, especially in ancient Roman daily life.

Society as ancient Romans knew it was based on a sort of give, and take AND give and take.

To be sure, most ordinary persons relied on patrons who provided for their daily sustenance.

In ancient Roman society, individuals would daily go to the homes of their patrons, and their patrons would give them a little food or money.

The Latin term for this gift was *sportula*. Spelled s-p-o-r-t-u-l-a.

And this was the world in which Jesus and Paul was living—this world of the ancient Roman Empire in which most people were fed on this common dole, if you will, provided to the masses by the generosity or “GRACE” of the patrons.

And this routine happened every morning, whereby individuals frequented the homes of their patrons for the *sportula*.

And with this routine in mind, it makes us re-think the meaning of what we pray to God in the Lord’s Prayer: “Give us this day our daily bread.”

We are like the masses in the ancient Roman Empire, who approach our patron seeking our daily sustenance.

Only our patron is God the Father, who gives us his “GRACE,” his generosity, each day.

“Give us this day, our *sportula*, our daily bread, our daily sustenance.”

“Give us each day our daily bread.”

PAUSE

But the *grace* of the patron was only one side of the equation.

The recipient of that grace from the patron was expected in response to show gratitude, an English word that contains “grace” in it—gratitude.

The recipient of the patron’s grace showed gratitude by honoring their patron.

And so, early Christians understood that it was their duty to gratitude their patron God, by giving honor to God.

To withhold one’s gratitude in the ancient Roman world was to suffer disgrace in society.

And it is very telling then that in nearly every letter of the apostle Paul (save one), Paul expresses his thanks first and foremost to God for the community to whom he is writing.

This is Paul’s way of honoring God, by acknowledging his gratitude for the community of believers.

Paul converted a the community of believers to honor God (in Philippi, in Thessalonica, in Corinth, wherever Paul went), for this was the way by which Paul gave thanks to God for the grace God had shown to him in the person of Jesus Christ.

And the word Paul used to give thanks to God is *eucharisto*.

Eucharisto is a word that contains in it the Greek word for grace *charis*.

And we may be familiar with the image from ancient Rome of the three graces dancing with arms linked as in a circle.

The image of the three dancers is to remind us that in ancient Roman society there was indeed a dance of grace that went around in a circle.

The patron provided grace, daily generosity, to the recipient, and the recipient returned the grace in the form of thanksgiving.

And, taking this one step further, we need to remember that the communion meal that we share in worship is sometimes referred to as Eucharist, again the Greek word for thanksgiving.

Our communion meal is a thanksgiving meal.

For what are we giving thanks in the communion meal?

But for the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, his body broken for us, his blood shed for us.

But how are we honoring God by partaking of this meal.

How do we honor our patron God by consuming this thanksgiving, this Eucharist meal?

If we are in fact going to keep true to the pattern of the ancient Romans, where the recipient of grace honors their patron in return...

How do we honor God by eating our Lord's body and blood?

By becoming what we eat.

What? How's that?

We honor God by becoming what we eat.

Like the saying, "You are what you eat," we honor God by becoming servants like Christ was a servant to us.

We honor God by living in a sacrificial way like Christ was a sacrifice for us.

Not that we die on the cross.

But we do sacrifice our time, our energy, our resources...

We give of ourselves for the sake of others.

We become what we eat.

This is how we honor our gracious patron, who gave himself in the person of his Son, who died on the cross.

Now, thank goodness, we don't become what we eat on Thanksgiving Day.

Thank goodness there is no obligation for us to be like some turkey, right? Although, we might sometimes wonder about some.

No, this Thanksgiving meal we celebrate in worship is unique, is different, because our expression of thanksgiving is not just saying “thanks” to God, or thanks to some person, or a general word of thanks...

No, this Thanksgiving demands a commitment of our very person.

This Thanksgiving demands that we become what we eat, a living sacrifice, a person who serves others.

PAUSE

So, coming full circle, to where we began this sermon, this Thursday may just be the holiest holiday on the calendar.

But, if we want to understand what it means to give thanks in all sincerity for the abundance of grace we have known in life, then we have to experience this Thanksgiving meal, this Eucharist.

For God has given the whole of God’s self for each of us.

And our thanks is to live our lives for others, too.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.