

Nov. 18, 2007
Habakkuk 3:17-19
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
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Thanks Living

One of the privileges of being a pastor is hearing from people about the things that matter most to them. I have found that the ways of our hearts are particularly visible as our time for living on this planet draws to a close. Recently, a long time member of our congregation Norman Hamlin died, as many of you know. One of the ways Norman was involved here at First Parish is that he was a member of our Earth Care Team. He was consistently reminding all of us to be good stewards of creation. So neither Larry nor I were surprised that in our last visits with him, what Norman really wanted to pray for was the earth. Right till the end, Norman's focus remained on God's amazing creation and our call to stewardship – to be good stewards of all the creation around us.

We live in a time in the 21st century where, in our mind's eye, we can step back and imagine the whole planet and the ways everything on this globe is interconnected. Where, as one scientist put it, the fluttering of butterfly wings in Brazil affects the weather patterns in New England. It is a new way of looking at the world.

It was certainly not the worldview of those who set off from Europe heading for the "New World" in 1620. Those people we now speak of as the Pilgrims. Yet their pastor, John Robinson, urged them as they departed to keep their minds and hearts open to new ways. God, he says, "has yet more light and truth to break forth out of God's holy Word." We live in their heritage as we come to new

ways of seeing and understanding the world.

We trace our day of Thanksgiving back to those Pilgrims who when they arrived on these shores gave thanks – for a new land and an opportunity for new beginnings. As we celebrate Thanksgiving we often have a romantic picture of a Thanksgiving table with Pilgrims and Native Americans all gathered together. And there were ways in which they were gracious one to the other. However, we also know that there is much more to the story including starvation, diseases introduced to both groups by the other, and intercultural conflict. Knowing the rest of the story brings more poignancy and richness to those Thanksgiving scenes.

For us today thought Thanksgiving is not just about remembering a time long ago – it is also a present reality. A day for giving thanks for our lives. It seems ironic somehow, though, to have a Thanksgiving DAY, as if one day could hold all our need for giving thanks. It is a radical reminder to most of us of the incredible abundance in our lives.

Imagine a Thanksgiving gathering. The first blessing that quickly comes to mind is food – a table richly laden with our families' particular favorites. The good news is that there will be plenty of food on the table. The bad news is that there will be too much food and we will eat it, and eat it, and eat it. Because we have the privilege of eating regularly (which many people in the world do not)

we often forget the absolutely amazing way in which food enters our bodies and, without our even needing to consciously think about it, sustains our life.

In addition, there is the blessing of those who gather around the table with us – those who have given home to us, those we have claimed as partners and friends on life's journey, and those to whom we have given home. Our lives are woven together with laughter and tears. And there is always more texture and poignancy to that picture as well.

Thanksgiving is a time of giving thanks for blessings:

For our daily bread,
For those who share our love,
For the freedom to worship openly.

We are richly blessed, and in the words of the old hymn we are inclined to "Count our blessings, Count them one by one.." There is truth in this advice for indeed there are few virtues more rich than an attitude of gratitude.

However, there is can be a dark side to counting our blessings. The perspective can shift subtly and become alienating. So easily we may be tempted to see how many blessings we can count for ourselves. It can even become a blessings contest based on the all American truth that more is better. We may find ourselves glancing over our shoulders checking our neighbors' blessings to see if we are getting our fair share. We may catch ourselves grimacing at the painful burdens of others and secretly thinking, "I am blessed that I am not burdened like so and so." There is something very insidious in this perspective for it alienates us one from another.

Martin Bell, A Christian writer, has written a powerful short story, "Crazy Mary Katherine," in which the main character, Mary Katherine has recently spent time in a hospital which cares for people with emotional and spiritual traumas. Mary Katherine speaks to the concern of counting blessings and thankfulness.

Everybody gets really angry when I tell them I'll be happy to give the money (women from the church who are asking for a contribution to a charity) only I don't want to count my blessings. There's a difference between being thankful and counting your blessings. I learned that in church. And if I hadn't learned it in church, it's for sure I would have learned it in the hospital.

I got stuck with this crazy roommate who kept on rocking a rag doll....and pretending it was her little girl who had died. They sent me there to get well, but I don't think I made it. What did happen was that I grew up in a hurry. And right in the middle of it all, I learned a whole lot about what it means to be thankful...

One day (my roommate) walked over to the window and just stood there looking out. I remember she was holding her make-believe child very tight and sort of moaning. The next minute she turned around and held out the rag doll. "Here," she said, "I want you to have this. I don't need it any more." I was real scared. I didn't know whether to take her doll or not. Then all of a sudden I realized that she wanted to live. ...I took the doll from her and we both wept. For three hours I sat and hugged that doll. I probably should have hugged my roommate, but I never thought of that...

Being thankful means saying yes to life in spite of all the obvious suffering and brokenness and guilt that's involved. It means enduring unbearable hardships for no other reason than to show up again tomorrow and be part of this whole wild cosmic adventure.
(*Nenshu and the Tiger*, 51-54)

Mary Katherine calls us from simply giving thanks for blessings when things go well, to thanks living – living with God in a spirit of thanks – a way of being that says yes to life – even with all its ambiguities.

When a healthy new baby is born,
When the lab results come back clean,
When the sun shines warm on a
gorgeous day,
Thankfulness easily bubbles over our
lips,

But there are times
when fear grips our souls,
When death haunts our dream,
When suffering threatens to destroy us,
And all we can whisper is “God do not
leave us alone.”

It is in just such a time that the prophet Habakkuk lived. The nation Judah was being destroyed, the people were losing their promised land, and the prophet cries, “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you do not hear?”

It is a time of deep and searing anguish for this prophet and people and yet the last words from this prophet are an incredible proclamation of thankfulness similar to Mary Katherine's.

*Though the fig tree do not blossom,
Nor fruit be on the vines,
The produce of the olive fail*

*And the fields yield no food,
...
Yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will joy in the God of my salvation.*

In the days of the prophet, failing crops whether by drought or flood, were seen as a localized event. In our world, we are increasingly aware of how localized climates are interconnected around the planet. We are also increasingly aware of how those climates are shifting, and the impact that is having on populations who have previously located where it was possible to grow food and now it is becoming increasingly difficult to do so.

I can hear Norman Hamlin now. When the crops fail and the fields yield no food, it is matter for all of us – all around the world - to be concerned.

In the gospel lesson we hear Jesus saying to the Pharisees, the kingdom of God is within you, among you, in the midst of you. We are to embody the ways of God with one another.

That is why we support Mid Coast Hunger Prevention in its ongoing work to address the issues of hunger right in our neighborhoods. It is why we support our denomination, the United Church of Christ, and its hunger relief efforts as well as its work to address the systemic issues that foster hunger and poverty.

As we approach Thanksgiving, instead of just giving thanks, let us live thankfully – with joy for the earth, for the gifts of the earth that make life possible, for the rich diversity of people and cultures that live on this planet, and for people like Norman who remind us of our calling to be good stewards of all we have, all we are, and all creation around us.