

Squamish United Church
Rev. Karen Millard
Thanksgiving

October 13, 2019

Scriptures:
Philippians 4:4-9
John 6:25-35

Everyday Thanksgiving

Alice Walker wrote: "But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and cried and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it...I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple somewhere and don't notice it."

Every day, we walk by the color purple, or green, or yellow, or blue, and we don't notice it.

Every day, we refuse to hear the sound of laughter, or footsteps, or birdsong, or weeping.

Every day, God's extravagant gifts surround us and fill us and connect us with every one and every thing, and we don't notice it.

Come and hear what God has done:
Even when we don't notice, God's extravagant gifts continue to surround us and fill us and connect us with every one and every thing, Showering our lives with grace.

Thanksgiving is one of those grand holidays in America when everyone is trying to get home for the holidays. In America it is the busiest holiday of the year for the airlines, the railroads, the highways, and buses. Everyone is trying to get home for the Thanksgiving holiday, to be with family, if at all possible. That was true for me when I was a little girl. Canadian Thanksgiving in my family is very important too but not near the ceremony of the U.S. Thanksgiving. This year is no exception a huge family reunion has been planned for this November. We will all gather in Seaside Oregon next month. When I was a girl growing up, our family traveled to Woodburn Oregon every year either for Thanksgiving or Christmas and usually Easter too. My mother was the oldest of twelve children, and most of the twelve had two or three children of their own, so there were a lot of relatives there. Almost everybody came to Thanksgiving. Everyone but us lived in the US but they came together from Ohio, Boston, California, Washington State and then

most lived in the Woodburn/Portland area. There were so many cousins, and so much food and turkey and pies and Carmel apples. The dinner and party would be held at Grandma and Grandpa's house and the children (my cousins and I who are now in our 40's and 50's but of course still "the kids") can tell you about the years where we were told we had to go to the basement. Our uncles and aunts (some only a few years older than us and closer in age to us than they were to our parents) would ban us to the basement so they could watch football. We had the old crackling tv (of course black and white) that rarely worked along with a few board games that we played on the cement floor sitting on the dirty country braided rug. My oldest cousin sees those basement times as somewhat traumatic (probably because my youngest Aunt is only a year older than her and she felt she should get different treatment - also she lived in Oregon so spent a lot more time at Grandma's house) but I remember them with a warm heart and some of my best childhood moments. I wish I could take you all to my Grandma's house. The family sold it just last year and it breaks all of our hearts but it just wasn't practical to keep the big old beautiful house just so we could gather once in awhile (as much as we wanted to). My kids will never experience a thanksgiving like that and as us 'kids' have gotten old fewer and fewer of us can get the time off to go every year (especially for us Canadians for which it isn't a holiday at all). The day of Thanksgiving has a long history to it. Thanksgiving, in the Jewish religion, started some 4500 years ago, in about 2500 BC. Yes, four thousand, five hundred years ago. The Israelites had a festival of ingathering, very similar to our festival of Thanksgiving. In the book of Leviticus, it says, "When you have gathered in the fruit of the land in the fall, you shall have a feast unto the Lord, and you should rejoice and be happy for seven days." I could handle that, a seven-day party with the family at Grandma's house. The first official, annual Thanksgiving in Canada was celebrated on 6 November 1879, though Indigenous peoples in Canada have a history of celebrating the fall harvest that predates the arrival of European settlers. Sir Martin Frobisher and his crew are credited as the first Europeans to celebrate a Thanksgiving ceremony in North America, in 1578. They were followed by the inhabitants of New France under Samuel de Champlain in 1606. The celebration featuring the uniquely North American turkey, squash and pumpkin was introduced to Nova Scotia in the 1750s and became common across Canada by the 1870s. I was shocked to find out that it was only in 1957 that Thanksgiving was proclaimed an annual event to occur on the second Monday of October.

The first national Thanksgiving in Canada was celebrated in the Province of Canada in 1859. It was organized at the behest of leaders of the Protestant clergy, and established as a national day of "public thanksgiving and prayer" in 1789. Imagine a day set aside for public prayer and acknowledgement of the gifts we have here in this beautiful country of ours. Not a bad thing to do in the midst of election season. We Canadians are so very blessed that we forget sometimes all we have. We have the right and ability to complain endlessly about our government and their policies, we have so much abundance that we drive our cars and waste our food to a degree we are guilty of destroying this beautiful earth we have been given. So that brings out a question What do we want?

A few weeks back I found myself in a situation with someone who had read several of my sermons online (there is always a danger in putting your words in the online world). He said I have read several of your sermons and most of them are really good I especially liked the one about insurance (I vaguely remember that one) any way he went on but you had this one sermon

- something about "waiting on God" I mean nice concept and thought provoking but... Admittedly I cut him off and I said good sermons are meant to be thought provoking and challenging not just easy to digest. I found myself a bit defensive (granted there had been a long conversation before this in which I felt very devalued) but I kind of wanted to tell this person off. First of all I am pretty sure that sermon was in the midst of our "Busy: reconnecting with the unhurried God" series and there was a whole liturgy and context you don't see online. Still that I am supposed to somehow hit holy homeruns every time I speak is just not realistic. "Yes, you feasted on so much but perhaps that sermon that didn't touch you was life changing for someone else. You have no idea how many times it happens for a minister that you get completely different critics of a sermon. One person comes to you in tears saying thank you while another says I didn't really get what you were trying to say. One week you touch one heart, the next week a totally different one. I am sure it is like that for a teacher or a reporter or... A client of anykind.

"This text today becomes water in the desert for me. It reminds me that the crowds then are not much different than the crowds now--all wanting more, still thirsty, still hungry. Augustine did say that our souls are restless until they find their rest in God. What a powerful observation. We are a hungry and thirsty people. We hunger to be seen, to be known, to matter, to have meaning and purpose. We are thirsty for recognition and affirmation that we are here.

John's Gospel tells us that they came looking for Jesus again.

Why did they come? We know that earlier in the chapter Jesus fed 5,000 with 12 baskets of leftovers. Because they sat down to eat what Jesus offered, they were filled with more than enough. Moreover, Jesus reads their motives in verse 26, "Very truly, I tell you, you are coming for me not because you saw signs but because you ate your fill of the loaves." They wanted full stomachs instead of fulfilled lives. They missed out that Jesus provides in times of hunger and thirst, not what he provides but that he provides. They ate the food but missed the meal and the message. A message that still says: "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." They missed the message that a life offered to Christ can be Gospel to the world. A life offered to Jesus won't be subject to the hunger pains of materialism or the stomach growls of self-indulgence. Jesus offers food that lasts.

He tells them and us in verse 27, "Do not work for the food that perishes but for food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." In other words, the things of this world have a shelf life, but the fruits of the word have eternal life. They last long after the service, after the marriage, after the celebration. This food lasts during the storms of life. This food sustains us from generation to generation.¹ Sometimes in our faith life we forget that Jesus tells us God provides not what we want but what we need.

David said in Psalm 139, "O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You discern my thoughts from far away." Who else could handle knowing that much about us and still love us?

¹ What Do You Want? John 6:24-35 9th Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 13) August 03, 2003

Protestant theologian Paul Tillich said the most predominant modern anxiety is spiritual; we suffer from emptiness or meaninglessness. Anthony de Mello, said, “You sanctify whatever you are grateful for.” In other words, instead of nursing our worries, change the focus. Look elsewhere, beyond self-absorption. Cultivate a grateful heart.

The ease of this cure is what makes it seem unrealistic. “Gratitude does not come easily, especially when we are caught in the grip of anxiety. Nor does gratitude come in a sudden conversion. It comes through a slow turning away from worry by intentionally stopping to find something, anything, for which to thank God. In the midst of worry, it can be a real stretch. Jesus encourages us to take something simple and common, for which to give thanks: a bird, a flower, a blade of grass. Anything will do: a breath of air, a dog’s loyalty, a glass of water. It is the small step of moving out of self to notice something or someone beyond the self that matters.

This small step leads to huge results. It leads to finally getting what Jesus is trying to tell us: everything is God’s, and God is eagerly waiting to give us more and more – if only we would allow it. Jesus wants us to notice what is in front of us, to believe that God is present and to be thankful. Change the subject, Jesus admonishes. There is a lot of stuff in life we are powerless to change, but changing the subject is always in our power.”

I love the season of fall. It is such a perfect life lesson every single year. More than once this week I looked out my office window to notice the colour changes on the leaves of the trees. Every year nature symbolizes for me its beautiful courage of letting go. It is like it has taken its time to flourish and now it is time to rest for a short season before it is time to celebrate and live abundantly again.

This week, I noticed the leaves falling while the tree branches remain stretching heavenward--not only will they do that today but they will remain that way after the leaves are gone, and when the snows come and the brutal winds of Squamish bend them into submission. But in the spring the trees will speak again. Perhaps we might hear them saying, "Notice that we kept our branches lifted towards where our help comes from." The trees seem to praise God with or without leaves, as if they know that keeping their branches up is like a patient waiting faith, and in the spring when the buds appear on their branches just might say, "We told you. We told you that our help comes from above."

“So not only does this text tell us that God provides through Jesus not what we want but what we need and that God's promise can sustain us through all times, but, finally, the text tells us God's presence through Jesus allows us room to grow in grace.”

As I wrote this sermon I was very conscious to write what I believe and what I know. It was a hard, hard week. I spent more time meditating than I have for awhile because I was too stressed not to pray and too busy not to pray. I sent a note to our staff telling them all to do the same thing. It was short moments here and there. I came into my office every morning and put on a 5 minute guided meditation because I needed to centre myself. And a half hour later when I didn't feel centred I took a deep breath or two. That is my honest truth. We are talking about budget cuts and job cuts and more these days and that is real stuff and its hard and its scary. And yet, when I stop and reflect and pray I know God is with us, you and me and our little congregation and as long as we live in hope and trust and faith we will live abundantly somehow or other. It was as I sat in this stress this Friday morning that I received one of the greatest gift of my ministry ever, and I intentionally have it here on the thanksgiving table this morning because it

was a perspective change moment for me when it arrived. I was sitting in my office and I saw Diane Ionson walk past my window. I gasped because I have not seen her for a long time and I miss her and Bert around here but I understand that it is just too hard a place for her to be. I get that completely. But I jumped out of my chair because I needed to see her face and give her a hug (maybe I needed it more than she did in that moment to be completely honest). But what she did blew my mind. She handed me a bag and she said "I am sure you know what this is" and I am pretty sure my response was "How dare you bless me." See one thanksgiving Bert began a tradition. He slipped into my office after the Thanksgiving service and he said "I know how hard you work and I just wanted you to know how thankful I am for you." Bert knew I like beer and he had been to the Brew pub earlier in the week and tried the pumkineater beer. For some unknown reason he thought of me and felt compelled to buy it for me for a thanksgiving day present. In that moment I was so blessed and overjoyed but it was Friday morning that gift hit me like it hadn't before. Someone who in all truth is still in deep grief brought me a gift, said thank you and blessed me. I don't deserve that. She had no idea what my heart was doing on that day. She had no idea that I was feeling like a failure, perhaps she had no idea that God was using her in that very moment to remind me of perspective and reality and where I as a minister and we as a church have come.

See it is so very easy for us to beat ourselves and one another up in this world. It is so easy to forget what we have when we are faced with life. I don't want to sound trite because I know life is hard. I know we have relationship breakdowns, I know there are bills that we simply can't pay, I know there are bad jobs and impossible co-workers (or so we feel) but there are also moments of joy and grace and peace. God writes us each morning with a sunrise greeting and each evening with a sunset closing. Knowing that makes us teachable disciples aware of an all-knowing God. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

"But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and cried and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it...I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple somewhere and don't notice it."

Amen.