



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., Rector

## Thanksgiving

*Sermon preached at the six o'clock service, November 23, 2022*

*Thanksgiving Eve*

*Based on Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Philippians 4:4-9; John 6:25-35*

*Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.*

*Take our lips and speak through them.*

*Take our hearts and see through them.*

*Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen*

Thanksgiving has become our favorite national holiday, and I confess I'm still a little surprised by this evolution. As a child, Thanksgiving seemed little more than a weak warm-up for the *real* holiday that was soon to follow. I mean, any holiday requiring a good deal of politeness in the company of family and strangers—and one featuring a long meal with no gifts and no fireworks—is guaranteed to fall far down the list for the average child.

And even though Thanksgiving has begun to inspire a dazzling array of turkey-festooned products, and even though Thanksgiving highlights a preoccupation with food which borders on the obsessive, I still believe it remains the purest of all our national holidays. It's a celebration not yet commandeered by greedy commercialists or overly-enthusiastic patriots. It's a celebration through which we are moved to give thanks, even in the midst of hate crimes, stock failures, inflation, and the threat of a nuclear Armageddon.

Year after year, records are broken for traffic and air travel as people scatter to the four corners of the country to be with family and friends for a holiday which, at its center, focuses on the ritual known as "The Thanksgiving Dinner." We now know a little bit better the importance of this meal because the pandemic denied it to so many of us with pre-existing conditions or fears for children or older family members. Remember that old Joni Mitchell song, "Don't it always seem to go, that you don't know what you've got till it's gone."<sup>i</sup>

At some point during this dinner, we traditionally give thanks for the blessings of our lives, and I've been moved by all the ways so many people share their blessings at this meal. In my household, we began the tradition of going around the table and asking family members and guests to recall what they have been most thankful for during the past year; and, even though it can be uncomfortable to share all the ways in which one has been blessed, there are some years when the responses bring tears to everyone sitting around the table. To give thanks for family support in the midst of bereavement or for the compassion of dear friends in the midst of a tough stretch of life is to acknowledge the love of God as expressed through the people around us.

And, in this way, I believe the Thanksgiving Dinner has become, along with the lighting of Advent Candles, one of the two home-based liturgies Christian families celebrate regularly. I believe it is an interesting (and spiritually important) exercise to periodically examine what we value in this world and to give thanks for what we've been given. We all need to ask, "What has become important to me over the years? What are the pieces of my life which demand most of my attention?" And, also, "What things have lost value in the living out of my life over the past year?"

Of course, to gather around a table, sharing a meal, and offering thanks is nothing new to a Christian community, which is called to do so on a weekly basis in the form of Holy Communion, the Eucharistic feast. But why do we do it? Why do we feel compelled to offer thanks?

*I. We give thanks because we are God's beloved.*

Theologian Karl Rahner writes, "God has loved his children from eternity. He has borne them in His mind from everlasting to everlasting. There is never a moment, while God lives and thinks and loves, when these lives, these persons and their eternal destinies, are not present to Him, enfolded in His all-creative wisdom and embraced in His divine love. He spent himself as love, which He is, for the sake of that which cannot in its own right, claim such a love. He gave Himself away."<sup>ii</sup>

This outpouring of love—this unspeakable gift—asks for, perhaps even *demands*, our profound thanksgiving. Gratitude—thanks-giving—is at the core of the Christian faith. It's rendered unto God and takes place in the context of a relationship. The English word for "communion," *eucharist*, comes from the Greek word *eucharisteo*, which literally means "thanksgiving." Therefore, every service of Holy Communion is a thanksgiving to God, a relational response to God's love.

In the ritual act of Holy Communion, we cross time and transcend space, and we are suddenly there, present at that first table. The very table where, on the night he was betrayed, our Lord took bread and broke it, and then took a cup of wine and blessed it. In the sacred act of eating bread and drinking wine, we are united, not only with God, but with one another; and, having been united, nothing is ever, or can ever, be the same again.

*II. We give thanks to God because we depend upon God.*

Friederick Schleiermacher was arguably the most dominant Protestant theologian between John Calvin and Karl Barth. He said that religion is finally and essentially a unique form of "feeling." Schleiermacher concluded that this "feeling" was best described as a "consciousness of absolute dependence" upon God. Absolute dependence. Now, there's something we know a little something about!

We begin our lives in absolute dependence. Without loving parents to nurture and care for them, a child cannot survive. An infant depends upon his or her mother or father to meet virtually every need. We, too, are dependent upon the power of love to nurture and to heal and to animate. We require the love of God, and we need the care of others. Spiritually, we depend upon the nurture of other Christians to "raise us in the faith" and to help us find our way when we can't do it on our own.

A God who remains faithful even when we are faithless is a God worthy of our thanks. A God who speaks to old maintenance men at work and young waitresses on the bus home, a God who speaks to frightened children in war zones, to the homeless in shelters is a God who might speak to any one of us. A God who forgives the faithlessness of priests and the ingratitude of the rich is a God who can forgive *our* faithlessness and *our* ingratitude.

*III. Finally, we give thanks because everything we really need has been provided for us.*

"Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Everything we truly need for our life has been provided by an all-loving, grace-filled God. There is no need to be anxious! God provides us with the things we most genuinely need.

We come to this night in holy thanksgiving for a gift which is beyond our ability to describe or measure. Is this what Thomas Aquinas was talking about when he wrote to his friend, "I have seen things which make all my writing seem like straw"? Poor Thomas. At the end of a stunning academic career and, next to Augustine, perhaps the greatest theologian in the history of Western Christianity, Thomas shared his deepest and truest feelings with a close friend, and what did he conclude? The things that had seemed most important to him were actually of very little consequence.

We suspected it all along. To experience the living God is to make all human yearnings seem like straw. One fragmentary nanosecond, one stammering glimpse of the Eternal is enough to understand the incompleteness of our every attempt to understand or communicate with the Holy. Aquinas actually wanted to burn all of his writings because his later experiences of the authentic presence of God made useless chaff of a lifetime of brilliant academics.

In the comforting words of the Letter to the Philippians, Paul wrote, "The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Perhaps it's a much more humble prayer that begs to be prayed on this occasion. Perhaps something like the one prayed by the man who said, "Thank you, God, for this good life, and forgive us if we do not love it enough."<sup>iii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Joni Mitchell, "Big Yellow Taxi," circa 1970

<sup>ii</sup> Karl Rahner, copied, source unknown

<sup>iii</sup> Garrison Keillor, *Leaving Home; A Collection of Lake Wobegon Stories*, Penguin Books, c. 1987