

Sermon for Thanksgiving Eve—Year B 2018  
*A Place at the Table for Everyone*

Gratitude is good for you.  
It not only makes you feel better to be thankful,  
studies have shown gratitude can improve your health.  
It can alter your immune system, lower your blood pressure,  
make you sleep better, it can strengthen your heart health,  
it lowers stress, and it can reduce brain aging.  
Some of us are naturally grateful . . . it's just how we're wired.  
others of us have to work at it,  
we have to keep journals to keep focused on gratitude in our prayer life.  
As Christians, there is an ever deeper reason that we give thanks.  
We are beyond grateful for God's steadfast love . . .  
God's covenant loyalty with and for us.  
God never gives up on us.  
God is always faithful to us.

So now, I ask you:  
for what in your life do you give thanks to God?  
Take a few moments to think about it.

Do you feel your health improving?  
I encourage you to do this regularly in your prayer life,  
in your home life . . .  
do it for yourself, but also with others.  
For what do you give thanks for each day?

The psalmist reminds us that God has done great things for us.  
And so we give thanks, acknowledging  
that God is the source of all our blessings, all that we are and have.  
We give thanks for God's steadfast love,  
for coming to us in God's self-giving love for us.  
We give thanks to the God of our salvation, our deliverance.

This type of thanksgiving is more essential than ever in our 21<sup>st</sup> century lives.

We tend to look in this day and age anywhere else for salvation *but* God.

We tend to look for salvation in all the wrong places in money and financial schemes, celebrity and status, political or financial power, in weapons, and in the hoarding of our resources.

But as followers of Jesus, we are offered an alternative way rooted in our gratitude for Jesus and for his self-giving love for each one of us.

His saving love is still on the move, still making all things new.

God's salvation is not just a thing of the past.

God's love in Christ is still redeeming and restoring our world.

When we celebrate together,

we not only give thanks to God for this saving love,

we also invite others to celebrate and experience this love with us, this love which is our hope and the hope of the world.

Another word for holy communion is Eucharist which comes from the Greek word "to give thanks."

When we call Communion the Eucharist,

we are specifically giving thanks to God

for all of creation and for all of God's saving acts.

From the first Easter morning, the disciples gathered in his name, recognized the risen Christ in the breaking of the bread.

As the followers continued to gather in the early church,

they remembered his life, death and resurrection

and experienced his presence

in the breaking of the bread and sharing the cup.

Unfortunately, through the centuries

as the church became public and organized and institutionalized,

this meal has been the cause of disunity and wars

as we fight over the meaning of this meal and what happens.

Isn't it tragic that we can turn a meal that celebrates unity with God into something that separates us and causes us to say, in essence, "you are not welcome at the Lord's table. It is one of the reasons this congregation decided—with support from our Bishop and Synod—to extend the widest possible invitation to this meal in which Christ himself is both the host and the guest. After all, who invites someone to their home for a meal and doesn't set a place for each guest?

What does it mean for us day in and day out, week after week, month after month, that we gather each Sunday at a table where a place is set for *everyone* who is hungry for the bread of life and thirsts for the cup of salvation? How can that change how we live in the world? How does it change the way we view a neighbor and the stranger?

Here's some of what it means for me. It means that we as Christians make an exclusive statement of faith about who God is, but we offer a very inclusive, wide invitation to share our faith with others. There are no boundaries in such an *inclusive* invitation, no one is left out, no one needs to go hungry or thirsty, no one is to be rejected, lonely, on the outside looking in. Everyone has a place at the table.

What is more . . . what happens at our Great Thanksgiving meal, doesn't stay here. This is not only a foretaste of the great feast to come, it's a rehearsal for the embodiment of the kingdom—where the Risen Christ reigns, and where only Christ can judge who is not welcome.

We, who are beggars before God, as we kneel around the Lord's table, put our hands out to receive all that Christ has to give—his very self. So when we see someone else—begging and in need—we know that hand that is reaching out needs to be filled with something life-giving and life-affirming.

And so, out of the deep and abiding joy of the welcome we have received, we, in turn, we welcome others.  
In the deep and abiding joy for our having been fed and forgiven, we do what we can to feed and forgive others.  
In the deep and abiding joy for receiving God's saving grace, we seek to be agents of that same saving grace in the lives of family, friends, and neighbors both near and far.

For all this and so much more we give thanks with joy each time we take our place at the Lord's table.  
It is that Eucharistic gratitude that needs to spill over into our lives, into all the other meals that we eat, all the other relationships we have.  
Gratitude can be contagious so I hope that the Eucharistic gratitude we share now spills out onto Burton Avenue and runs out through our community, throughout the State, into our country, and (let's not think small) into the world.

One church in Indianapolis wanted to give thanks for youth by awarding scholarships to young people—not just the youth of their own church, but youth throughout their community. Now the scholarships they awarded were not the usual academic scholarships awarded for school achievement. Instead they wanted to invest in a gift, a passion or a talent in the lives of young people. One young man who awarded such a scholarship in his junior year of HS. This young man deeply struggled in school.

In fact, in his Freshman year he received a letter saying that he would never achieve anything . . .

In fact, the letter stated that it was probably a waste of time for him to remain in school, they offered to give him a certificate since he would likely never achieve anything and not finish HS.

And yet, in his junior year, this church awarded him a scholarship. The church held a meal of celebration for that young man. As he and the guests invited sat around the table, each person offered a word of thanksgiving and celebration for what they saw as a gift or potential in this young man—his grandmother, his aunt, his friends, members of his home church, and members of the scholarship church.

They gave him their blessing.

The young man just sat there in shock.

He could not imagine that others saw those gifts and potential in him. But their different vision made him see himself differently, he began to see those gifts and potentials in himself.

He began to cry with joy.

Then they asked him what additional support did he need to live into gifts.

Once again, each person told him what they could give him to support his gifts and potential.

One participant in this meal told the pastor, I need to do this for all the young people I know.

The pastor thought, “What’s stopping you? What’s stopping all of us? And why only the young people we know? Why not all young people, or even all people we know?”

Gratitude is good for you.

It not only makes you feel better to be thankful, studies have shown gratitude can improve your health.

Yes, it can alter your immune system, lower your blood pressure, make you sleep better, it can strengthen your heart health, it lowers stress, and it can produce brain aging.

And it is the greatest antidote to worry and anxiety.

And so my hope and my prayer for all of us on this night,  
is that we will be filled with Eucharistic gratitude and joy  
that will spill out into our daily lives,  
into our life together and the ministries that we share,  
into our homes, our communities,  
our work places, our schools, our country and world . . .  
so that all may know they are welcome,  
they have God-given potential and gifts to share,  
and that a place at the table is set for them.