

GRATEFUL FOR THE BEST OF OUR HERITAGE

Matthew 5:13-16

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20 November

Isn't it tempting to think that other eras, other times, were easier than ours? We look back with nostalgia, romantically imagining the good old days, a simpler world. We go into an antique store and see a butter churn, and we think, "How cute. That would look just darling in a corner of my living room." We don't think about how hard it would have been to have to make our own butter, and soap, and do laundry by hand. We tend to have a sentimental notion of former times.

We do that with Jesus. We think of him strolling from village to village, followed by sheep. He would stop to pat little children on the head. We picture Galilee as a quiet, tranquil, peaceful, rustic place. Actually, scholars tell us, Galilee was a hotbed of political activity, some of it violent; Jesus' home region was a center of social dissent and economic protest. Rome had been oppressing these Palestinians, forcibly taking their land, exploiting them through excessive and unfair taxation. And some were rising up in opposition. There were groups of what scholars call "bandits", Robin Hood types, who were stealing from Roman officials for purposes of both survival and protest. This is the context in which Jesus' ministry took place. It was not a bucolic scene. It was a time of intense social unrest and upheaval.

We imagine the first Thanksgiving, and our minds go to pictures we saw in grade school textbooks. Pilgrims in their freshly-ironed white collars sitting at a table next to the native Americans, calmly passing the cranberry sauce down the table. In reality, forks didn't arrive in Plymouth until late in the 1600's. One historian says that "the feasters probably sat or squatted on the ground as they gathered around outdoor fire pits where venison and birds turned on wooden spits, and where pots containing vegetable and meat stews simmered. They used knives to carve

away their portions and ate the food with their fingers.” The Pilgrims were grateful for the harvest, but grieving the fact that half of them had not survived the first winter. The relationship with the native Americans was surely fraught with tension.

If times were difficult in 1621, they were even more difficult in 1863. That was when Abraham Lincoln declared the fourth Thursday of November to be the official Thanksgiving holiday for the United States. President Lincoln’s own life was at a very low ebb in 1863. His political future looked bleak, to say the least. He knew that if he was defeated in the election of 1864, the Confederacy would gain its independence and the Union would be permanently split. His only significant victory to that point had been at Vicksburg, on the Mississippi River, but the effects of that victory were not yet being felt.

Many of the members of his own cabinet openly despised him, and joked about him in public. His wife had been investigated as a possible traitor - a process which Lincoln personally found to be bitterly wounding. In the face of such personal and national circumstances, Lincoln’s call for a day of prayer would have made sense. But he called for a day of Thanksgiving.

Lincoln must have discovered the same principle that the apostle Paul knew. At a similarly low point in his own life, Paul wrote to his friends, “Don’t be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Paul was in prison when he wrote those words, fully expecting to be executed. He was at odds with the local Christian congregation. And yet, like Lincoln, he advised Thanksgiving - in the midst of great personal suffering.

The most challenging times can bring out the best in people.

Jesus emerged as a leader in a time and place of violent disruption. He wasn’t the leader anyone expected or wanted, but he was the leader everyone needed. He was completely true to himself, and to the one who sent him. Full of integrity and authenticity. He was humble and generous, yet he knew how to take care of himself. He didn’t care an iota about whether or not he

was popular. He spoke truth to power, he had compassion for everyone. He clearly had a heart for the poor and a passion for justice, but he would eat in the homes of the tax collectors and the Pharisees. He refused to be pigeon-holed. He believed that sometimes he could change hearts and minds not just through bombastic lectures but by sitting down with the enemy and talking, face to face, eye to eye, heart to heart. Yet he was also willing to die for what he believed in.

In the collection of sayings known as the Sermon on the Mount, he says to his followers, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. You are a city on a hill. Let your light shine."

One of our Pilgrim ancestors, John Winthrop, when he first set off for this country, proclaimed to his shipmates, "We shall be as a city upon a hill; the eyes of all people are upon us."

From that moment on, citizens of this nation have had a unique role in the world. Eyes are upon us. Because of the promise that our founders established - that here, all people are equal, others have looked to us to be an example of how a nation at its best conducts itself. Sometimes we have been worthy of that vision. In some ways we have not lived up to it.

At this point in history, we are being watched carefully by the rest of the world. Everyone knows that we are, in many ways, a divided nation. How will we conduct ourselves? Will there continue to be a peaceful transition of power? Will we continue to speak up for those who have no voice? Will the rights of all continue to be preserved?

In every era, Christians are called to be salt and light, to show forth what one writer calls: "a distinctive capacity to elicit goodness on the earth."

When Doug and I were in Europe on my sabbatical, we visited the concentration camp at Dachau. There was a barracks at Dachau particularly set aside for the clergy who had spoken up against the Nazi regime. One of the ministers who survived Dachau was Martin Niemöller. It was very moving for me to see where he had lived, as I'd read his writings for a long time, and my parents heard him speak.

Niemöller was a national conservative and initially a supporter of Adolf Hitler, but he became one of the founders of the Confessional Church, which opposed the nazification of German Protestant churches. He vehemently opposed the Nazis' Aryan Paragraph, but made remarks about Jews that some scholars have called antisemitic. For his opposition to the Nazis' state control of the churches, Niemöller was imprisoned in Sachsenhausen and Dachau concentration camps from 1937 to 1945. He narrowly escaped execution. After his imprisonment, he expressed his deep regret about not having done enough to help the victims of the Nazis.

He once preached a sermon on our passage for today, saying that it is tempting for Christians to put our lights under a bushel basket, to hide them out of fear. Shortly after he preached that sermon, he was arrested. He is best known for this saying: "First they came for the communists,

and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists,

and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews,

and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a Jew.

Then they came for me

and there was no one left to speak out for me."

For whom are we called to speak this day? People around the world are watching our nation, as if it were a city on a hill. We can be grateful for people of faith and courage who have gone before us. People like Abraham Lincoln. Like Martin Niemöller. Of course our supreme example is Jesus, who refused to demonize people, who showed compassion to all, and who put his life on the line for the sake of justice, for the sake of the voiceless, for the cause of love.

I had lunch with two minister friends on Thursday. One of them said to me, "I believe this is the church's finest hour." I believe it too. There is something stirring in the midst of us, a renewed commitment to BE the good news, to be salt and light, to speak out for love wherever there is hate.

Friends, this is a marathon, not a sprint. This is the work of our lifetimes. And to do it well, we need to take care of ourselves. I promised that I would share in this sermon some practical advice. We take our cue from Jesus, who found time to get away, to be restored in nature, to be renewed by solitude, to be refreshed through prayer. If our ministry and mission is going to be effective, we cannot become burned out. We need to make time for our own spiritual nurture. Our lives need to be balanced with laughter. Whatever is nourishing to your soul - whether it's music, conversation, exercise, art - be sure that you engage in it. Most importantly, put yourself on a media and technology diet. Get off the phone, get off CNN, get off Twitter, for as much time as your soul needs every day. Stay informed, but don't obsess.

I can't tell you how many people have said to me in the past twelve days, "I'm so grateful for the Avon Lake United Church of Christ." We are making a difference. We are bringing hope into the world. We are building houses, feeding the hungry, providing medical care in India. We are supporting one another, forming friendships, educating the next generation of moral leaders. Let us not weary in doing good. Let's do it together, with joy and with determination, and with gratitude. This can be our church's finest hour.