



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Thursday, November 24, 2011
Thanksgiving Day

Festal Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Joel C. Daniels
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A SERMON FOR THANKSGIVING DAY

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

I remember early on, in what has proven to be a nearly interminable educational career, a Thanksgiving activity that my elementary school teachers would have our class engage in. On a classroom bulletin board there would be pinned a large picture of a cornucopia, but one that was empty. Step one of our activity would be for each of the students to choose different drawings of fruits or vegetables and affix them to the board, so that this bulletin-board cornucopia would be full. Step two of our activity was more personal: we would write on a notecard something we were thankful for, share it with the class, and then pin it on the board, too. There was a lot of giving thanks for parents, and sometimes siblings; the occasional pet was mentioned; there were usually a couple smart alecks who would give thanks for their video games; and, of course, always one obsequious classmate who, with a cloying smile, would be thankful for his teacher. He would sit by himself at lunch that day.

Though that Thanksgiving activity may have had as much to do with no one wanting to do work the day before Thanksgiving as it had to do with a profound appreciation of this national holiday, the image of that bulletin board's overflowing cornucopia of squash and corn and beans is an important one, and an historically appropriate one. When our food choices were more closely tied to agriculture, by late November the harvest would have come in, the larders would be full, and hunger staved off for at least one more year. Even now, when food-gathering for most of us in this community involves the long aisles of supermarkets, not long rows of corn fields, we still mark the day with an appreciation of the bounty with which we have been blessed – usually by eating it. Most every day of special importance in the Church we call a “feast day,” but Thanksgiving is one where the feasting is literal. And not only those edible blessings of course, but also the ones my classmates and I recognized in grade school: families and friends; safety and security; health and wholeness; and yes, even video games and teachers.

Though it isn't often put in these terms, an appreciation of flourishing for one more year, of receiving from the bounty of God, is a recognition of our human finitude and dependence on God; this finitude and dependence may appear to be nearer or farther away, depending on the year – depending on the harvest, or the stock indices, or the housing market – but we forget it altogether at our own peril. The image of the overflowing cornucopia, of the larders bulging with harvest, is all well and good, but, one might ask, what do we do on Thanksgiving, then, when those larders are bare? This isn't only a question for late November.

A good, Christian woman with whom I was once acquainted knelt in prayer every night; I knew her when she was much older, but I was told she had done this her whole adult life. She bowed her head, and gave thanks to God for blessing her family, for the health and safety of her children, the children she loved so much. Every single night, on her knees: thank you God for my family; thank you for taking care of my children. And then, one day, the unthinkable happened.

At her son's funeral she remained composed. But, for the rest of her life, she never knelt in prayer again. What do we do on Thanksgiving, when the larders are bare? This isn't only a question for late November.

As a matter of fact, it's a question we face every time we gather at the altar. The word Eucharist means "giving thanks" – *eucharistia* in Greek – and one of the reasons we call the Eucharist the Eucharist is because it's a word that Jesus used at that first Holy Communion: "And when he had given thanks," when he had *eucharistasas*, "he broke it and said, 'This is my body.'" When he had given thanks, he broke it.

But this is a somewhat strange conjunction: he gave thanks for the bread about to be broken, but was he also giving thanks for the body – his own body – that was about to be broken as well? Can one give thanks for something like that?

One of the paradoxes, one of the mysteries, of every Eucharistic gathering, then, is that the thanksgiving we offer for our salvation is a thanksgiving for the self-offering of Jesus Christ, the spotless lamb. It is a thanksgiving, then, for the crucifixion – for a Friday that we call "good" – and a celebration that the benefits of that self-offering are free for us, though it was not free for him. In other words, the foundation of all thanksgiving, all *eucharistia*, is in this conjunction of thanks-giving, and suffering. Thanksgiving: "when he had given thanks." And suffering: "this is my body," that will be broken. For you.

So this incongruity is known to God himself, and known first-hand, so to speak. This is the Christ that we consume, the bread that we receive. We bring his broken body into our broken bodies – broken by hunger, by rejection, by loss – and we feast on the one who knows that loss even more intensely than we do. The crucified one, derelict on the cross, for whom the larder was truly bare.

But it is a thanksgiving that we offer, not only a memorial, because Christ's suffering and death were not the end of his story, or of ours: life was brought out of that death – the tomb was empty – and the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the promise of God's everlasting dwelling with us; nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. We give thanks for the resurrection promise that we have been received by grace into the life of God, so that, as Karl Rahner puts it, God and humanity can only be found together. So that the woman who stood up and never knelt again – never bowed her head again – she, too, was held in the loving arms of almighty God, who is closer to us than we are to ourselves. This is what we have been promised. That infinite distance has been crossed, and so God and me, God and you, are always found together.

I was reminded of this relationship in a particular way a few Sundays ago. During the administration of Communion to the clergy and acolytes, as the sacred ministers were going down the row there on the steps of the altar, I apparently forgot to offer the chalice to one of the priests – I won't say which one – and this anonymous priest brought this omission to my attention by saying, and not exactly *sotto voce*, "Give me the blood!" in his strong English accent. My second thought (I won't tell you what my first thought was) but my second thought was, Yes, of course! He has every right to demand the chalice: it was bought and paid for, for each one of us, at a very great cost. So, yes, receive the cup of salvation – even demand it – for it is the new covenant; the new covenant between God and us.

So, though I couldn't have known it at the time, the true shape of the overflowing cornucopia, on that elementary school bulletin board, is the heavy stone of the sanctuary altar, and its real contents are simply bread and wine. The thanks that we offer is for the fact that this bread is inexhaustible, given both as a present reality and a future promise of the heavenly banquet. It is not a guarantee that the larders will always be full; that there is not now, or will not be in the future, nails in hands, or spears in sides. But it is a guarantee that no trial is ever undertaken alone; a guarantee that life is brought out of death, and that we are never separated from our Creator and Redeemer.

Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the true Thanksgiving feast.

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Ghost. *Amen.*