

## Help With Thanksgiving

Deuteronomy 26:1-15

II Corinthians 9:6-15

November 20, 2011 – Hampton Baptist Church – Rev. Chris Kurtz

This year marks the 31<sup>st</sup> year of the Butterball hot line. In those 31 years there have been nearly 4 million calls to 1-800-BUTTERBALL asking for help in cooking a turkey. Each year 52 people are trained at Butterball University to respond and help callers through what they call "turkey trauma." After reading this little tidbit of information I decided to do a Google search and found some of the wackiest questions asked on the hot line:

1. "Can I use my oven's self-cleaning cycle to speed up the cooking process?"
2. A Virginia woman called and asked: "How do you thaw a fresh turkey?" The Hotline "trauma specialist" had to explain to her that a fresh turkey has not been frozen, so it was unnecessary to thaw it.
3. "Can I brine my turkey in the washing machine?"
4. "How do I get a Chihuahua out of my turkey?"
5. Should I leave the giblets in their plastic bag during cooking?
6. And finally the question that was probably called in by one of my relatives in Kentucky. "I've never cooked a turkey before--is it like cooking a raccoon?"

Apparently a lot of people need help with their Thanksgiving Turkeys. But what all of us could probably use is some help with is this thing called "Thanksgiving." The attitude of Thanksgiving and gratitude does not come naturally to us. In fact, it kind of goes against human nature and we need some help in remembering to be thankful.

As we think about what we are thankful for this year maybe like the person who wrote this list you are thankful for some of these things:

I am thankful for...

- the mess to clean up after a party because it means I have been surrounded by friends.
- the taxes I pay because it means that I'm employed.
- the clothes that fit a little too snug because it means I have enough to eat.
- my shadow who watches me work because it means I am out in the sunshine.
- a lawn that needs mowing, windows that need cleaning and gutters that need fixing because it means that I have a home.
- the spot I find at the far end of the parking lot because it means that I am capable of walking.
- all the complaining I hear about our government because it means we have freedom of speech.
- my huge heating bill because it means I am warm.
- the person behind me at church who sings off key because it means that I can hear.
- the piles of laundry and ironing because it means my loved ones are nearby.
- weariness and aching muscles at the end of the day because it means that I have been productive.
- the alarm that goes off in the early morning hours because it means that I am alive.

There is so much for which we have to be thankful.

The modern Thanksgiving holiday tradition traces its origins to a 1621 celebration at Plymouth when the pilgrims shared a meal of thanks with the Indians. After 1621, future Thanksgiving celebrations occurred at various times throughout the year. George Washington declared a feast of Thanksgiving in 1789, and presidents issued similar yearly proclamations after that. During the Civil War, poet Sarah Hale started a campaign to celebrate the holiday on the same day throughout the country.

President Abraham Lincoln was the one who saw it as a way to unite the country, and in 1863 he proclaimed a national Thanksgiving celebration in November. In 1941, Franklin Roosevelt finally proclaimed it a Federal holiday in 1941.

Did you know that President James Madison declared the celebration of Thanksgiving twice in the year 1815? No one knows why he chose to do this. Maybe he just liked a good party? For whatever the reason he had the right idea.

True thanksgiving has a multiplying effect. Pastor Martha Graybeal Rowlett writes, "It has been said that a thankful person tastes joy twice---once when it happens, and again when gratitude is expressed to God for the joy."

The truth is that God instituted the ceremony of thanksgiving nearly 3,000 years ago? That's what our scripture this morning tells us. After the Hebrews entered the Promised Land God called the Hebrews to bring offerings to the temple in remembrance of what God had accomplished. These were offerings of thanksgiving. What God called the Hebrew people to remember and be thankful are the same things we should celebrate and be thankful for as well. God reminds us this morning to be thankful for our future, our past and our present.

### **First we should be thankful for our future.**

God instructed the Hebrews to be thankful for not what God had done for them in the past, but what God would do for them in the future. In verse two of our passage, God instructs the Hebrew people to make an offering of the first fruits of their new land; the first harvest. This is an exercise in faith. But what if there isn't a second harvest? What if drought or flood or pestilence comes along and destroys their crops? They will not have enough food to survive! By requiring an offering of the Hebrews' first fruits, God is telling them to trust that God will provide for them in the future. True faith means telling God "Thank You!" first, and then watching for God to provide blessings that will come later.

There was a couple that was going through a rough period that taught them to trust in God's providence. The husband couldn't find work, and the family finances were dwindling quickly. One morning, his wife opened the pantry to find bags of potatoes and onions--and absolutely nothing else. And, to complicate matters, as she prayed over the family's financial situation, she felt God urging her to give away what they did have. What should she do?

When her husband came home he saw a moving van at the house next door where a new family was moving in. He asked his wife to take some food to the new neighbors next door. What was he doing the wife thought? Didn't he realize how dire their situation was? In spite of her misgivings, she loaded a picnic basket with potatoes and onions and delivered it to their new neighbors.

Later that day, the door bell rung and the wife answered the door to find the new neighbor's son on their front steps. He was carrying bags of groceries. His family's refrigerator hadn't been installed yet. They needed to get rid of the food they had brought from their old house. "Would she accept a couple of bags of groceries?" he asked. Of course, she would--with great joy. The couple could only interpret the neighbor's kindness like this: God had rewarded their giving by giving back to them abundantly.

God's first instruction to the Hebrew people and to us is to give thanks--not for what God had done for them in the past, but for what God will do for us in the future.

At Hampton Baptist we have been blessed with an incredible past, but let me tell what we really need to be excited about is our future. The past is but the foundation that supports the glorious and wonderful future that God is preparing for us. Let me share a paragraph from my November deacon's report with you. "2012 looks to be an exciting and blessed year in the life of Hampton Baptist Church. Because of the unique challenges/opportunities we face we have a lot of hard work to do. But we need to remember that God continues to provide all we need and has blessed us with wonderful people and an incredible future. May we continue to walk boldly, confidently and faithfully into that future with hope and praise in our hearts."

We should be thankful for our future.

## **Secondly we should be thankful for our past.**

That sounds easy. Thank God for the blessings we have enjoyed already--unless, of course, we've had a very bad year. Honestly, it's difficult at this point in time for some of us to give thanks. In fact, some of you may be sitting there thinking, "Chris, if you knew what this past year was like for me, you'd skip this part." And yet, think about the history of the Hebrew people. Life was no picnic, there was challenge upon challenge. Why did God want them to dredge up painful memories of slavery and oppression and homelessness? For some people, a walk down Memory Lane requires picking their way through an emotional minefield. How can we give thanks for our memories when so many of them are painful?

Author Patti Davis writes, "Pictures don't lie and memories don't lie, either. Memories are huge grab bags; we plunge our hands in and take out whatever matches the agenda of our hearts." And that is the link between remembering and being thankful: we can *choose* "the agenda of our hearts." We can *choose* how we remember the past. Even if the past has been unbelievably hard.

The most successful people are those who are able to see every hardship as an opportunity for God's amazing work to be done in their lives. Most times this comes as hindsight but they realize the incredible blessing that has been accomplished in their lives by God; and they are thankful for it.

In Genesis, chapters 37-50, we learn the story of Joseph, a promising young man whose life was thrown into turmoil by his jealous brothers. They sold him into slavery. Then in his new homeland--just as he was earning his master's trust, he was falsely accused of a crime and thrown into prison, where he was forgotten. It was only by God's guidance that Joseph overcame his past and was reconciled to his family. Yet after years of injustice and hardship, Joseph was able to say that what others had meant for evil in his life, God had used for good. (Genesis 50: 20)

When we reach into our "grab bag" of memories, we have a choice as to what we pull out. We can pull out memories of hardship, failure, disappointment, and bitterness. Or we can filter all these memories through God's promise of love, divine companionship, hope and a future knowing that God can use even our worst moments to mature us and bring us joy.

From a young age, singer Tony Bennett found security in the love of his family. Tony's father died when he was 10, and his mother worked hard to support her three children. It wasn't easy. Things were tight. Tony's favorite times were Sunday afternoons when all the extended family gathered together to eat a meal, sing some songs, and share memories. He says, "There was never a touch of loneliness, never a thought of what's going to happen to me? It's funny that, in the middle of deep poverty, it was the warmest time of my life."

You see, wealthy, famous, and very successful Tony Bennett looks back on his youth spent in poverty as one of the best times in his life. He *chooses* to remember his family's love and support, not their poverty. And these warm memories strengthen his character and bring him great joy.

The life of faith says that even the darkest times can be times of growth and times of tremendous blessing. We are blessed because we are not alone in the bad times. The ever abiding Spirit of Christ is our constant companion. Yes it is easy to be thankful in good times but the tough times can be a different story. We should *choose* to be thankful for Christ's presence in our lives and remember that Christ did not come to do away with heartache, hurt, disappointment and suffering. Christ didn't even come to explain those experiences or emotions. Christ came to fill those experiences with his presence.

As we look back at the good and even the bad may we *choose* to be thankful.

## **Finally, God reminds us that we should be thankful for our present.**

God's final instruction to the Hebrews was to thank God for the present. How were they to do that? By rejoicing in the here and now. It is so easy to find ourselves with one foot in the past and one foot in the future and totally missing the present.

Recently our Administrative Assistant Crystal and I were having a conversation discussing the challenges of church work. We both agreed that the most difficult thing is to live in the present. The church staff has been talking about and planning the Advent and Christmas season since the end of September. The choir got their music for the Sunday with the orchestra before that. We work so far ahead with planning that we already have our eyes set on Easter.

A month ago I was in Lowes and there side by side were Halloween and Christmas yard inflatables! Living in and enjoying the present can be a challenge for all of us. The Apostle Paul was a master at living in the here and now and being thankful no matter what the situation or circumstance was. Whether he was in prison or preaching to a crowd, establishing churches or shipwrecked, encouraging young followers or facing angry crowds Paul was thankful and found joy in what he was doing, who he was with and where he was.

Thankfulness and joy are contagious, so spread it around. Give others something to thank God for, too. When we embrace our daily life as the blessing it is the joy of Christ oozes out of us and onto other people. You never know whose life will be touched, whose perspective will be changed, by the simple act of thanks-living. Thanks óliving is when we live in the here and now with a joyful, thankful spirit.

It was Christmas Eve, and Dr. Leandra Lynch was stuck working the night shift in the emergency room. As the newest resident at the hospital, she had the last choice of shifts, so she got the ones nobody else wanted. Late that evening, an elderly man was admitted with chest pains. Dr. Lynch treated him for heart attack symptoms. She checked on him throughout the night. Eventually, he was stable enough to go home later.

The next year, Dr. Lynch was stuck once more working the night shift on Christmas Eve. At 9 p m., an elderly couple entered the emergency ward and introduced themselves to Dr. Lynch. The gentleman, Mr. Lee, wanted to thank her for saving his life the previous Christmas Eve and gave her a gift.

The next Christmas Eve at 9 p m., the Lees returned with another gift and a hug for Dr. Lynch. They just wanted to express their gratitude. And the next Christmas Eve they did the same. And the next. For 13 years, the Lees returned to the emergency ward on Christmas Eve to thank Dr. Lynch. And for the next 13 years, Dr. Lynch looked forward to working on Christmas Eve just for their visits. After Mr. Lee's death, Dr. Lynch and her family started a new tradition. Every year at 9 p.m. on Christmas Eve, they ring a small crystal bell--a gift from Mr. Lee--and toast the memory of a man who never forgot to be grateful.

To remember is to be thankful. And to be thankful is to taste joy twice. I hope this Thanksgiving you tell the story of this past year of your life--and as you tell it, focus on the positive. Focus on how God has guided you and provided for you. Remember what God has brought you through this past year. Remember God's promise of a "future and a hope" for you. And leave here rejoicing "in all the good things the Lord your God has given to you and to your family." And may every day be a day of Thank-living for all of us.

Amen