

ALL IS SAFELY GATHERED IN

November 22, 2009

Texts – II Samuel 23: 1 - 7
John 18: 33 - 37

Thanksgiving is just around the corner. Are you ready? Ready not with the food or the guest list or the plans ... but ready for what we've been talking and singing about in the service this morning. Ready for that spirit of thanks-giving without which the day becomes just another day to somehow get through?

Let me share a story. *"Our old friend's wife had just succumbed to cancer after a long struggle,"* Susan DeVore Williams writes, *"and when his letter arrived, I opened it with a certain amount of dread. It was hard to be reminded,"* she says, *"that this dear man was now so alone, without the comfort of children or other family. Thanksgiving was just around the corner, and it broke my heart to imagine how empty his tiny apartment would seem at this time of year. I was sure his letter would be a sad one."*

"But my old friend surprised me," Ms. Williams goes on. *"I thought I might go out to the cemetery today,"* he wrote, *'but instead I am sitting here thinking about Thanksgiving. I'm reminded (he went on) of the little boy who was asked by his teacher to describe salt. He answered, "Salt is what spoils the potatoes when you leave it out." Thankfulness is like that, I have decided. It's what spoils everything when you leave it out. God would probably forgive me for being unthankful right now, and he'd (sic) understand if I decided to ignore Thanksgiving this year. But I've made up my mind: I am not going to leave out thankfulness, no matter how I may be tempted. Having decided that, it's surprising how much better I feel, and how much I am finding to be thankful for.'*

Thankfulness is what spoils everything when you leave it out. Do you believe that? I do. But how do you find it? That's the question I'm wrestling with.

Thanksgiving is not an activity nor is it an accomplishment. As best as I can put it, it is an attitude – an attitude of trust in life as a gift. It has to do with the notion that, whatever comes, life is the good gift of a gracious God. Sometimes that's hard to hold onto; certainly it was so for

Susan Williams' friend. But is there really any alternative?

In the movie Shadowlands, which featured the life of C.S. Lewis, we hear Lewis say, *"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything,"* he goes on, *"and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the coffin of your selfishness. But in that place – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The only place outside heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers of love,"* Lewis concluded, *"is hell."*

Isn't that true? To love is to be vulnerable, but not to love is what? Isn't it a form of living death? Oh to be sure, there are no risks, but what price must we pay for such security?

Do you remember the old fable of King Midas? A modern version of it speaks of a man who was able to zap everything he saw into what he wanted. He could ask for something and it would be immediately granted. After a time, however, he became bored and tired of this way of living, and declared that he wanted to return to the old way of living his life, no matter how precarious that might be. "I'd rather be in hell than live like this," he said. A servant replied, "And where do you think you are?"

Thanksgiving, let me say again, is an attitude of trust in life as a gift. It has to do with the notion that, whatever comes, life is the good gift of a gracious God. Can you say that about your life? that it is a gift to you from a good and gracious God?

That is what David said at the end of his life. *"God has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure."* (2 Samuel 23: 5) Now before you dismiss that as being hopelessly pious and perhaps even self-righteous, let me remind you of some of the salient features of this man's life. Yes, he was a boy hero – elevated in adolescence from the obscurity of menial labor to universal acclaim as the champion of the nation's honor. Yes, he went on from there to become the first king of a unified Israel, *"one who rule(d) over (the) people justly."* (2 Samuel 23: 3) But before you conclude that it must have been easy for such a man to be thankful, consider that much of his adult life was spent in the midst of intrigue and violence. He

was betrayed by his mentor and spent years running for his life. He watched his best friend, Jonathan, die a painful and needless death. His most favored son, Absalom, was slain in battle. His greatest dream – to build a temple in Jerusalem – was denied. No, this man did not lead a charmed or easy life, yet he says at the end: *“God has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure.”*

Or again, what of Jesus? We see him in our scripture lesson stripped and bound, bleeding from the lash and facing the man who will order his execution in the same way you or I might swat a fly against the window pane. Pilate taunts him: *“Are you the King of the Jews?”*

Is he frightened? Sure he is. Does he want to live? Of course he does. But what does he say? Does he beg for mercy and plead for his life? No. He says simply, *“For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.”* A little while later, he adds: *“You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above.”* (19: 11)

Pilate, of course, doesn't get it. He doesn't understand this man standing before him, this man who seems so inexplicably trusting in life as a gift from the hand of God. How can he not be afraid of death?

This is the same dilemma we face. How can one be thankful ... how can you trust life as a gift from the hand of a good and gracious God ... when death is so hard to face into? And not just death as a biological fact of life, but the many “little deaths” we all die in the course of a lifetime – the losses we endure, the scars we bear, the disappointments we suffer.

So what do we do? We become cynical, don't we? Afraid to trust ... afraid to risk ... afraid to really love. Afraid. In C.S. Lewis' words, we surround ourselves *“with hobbies and little luxuries; we avoid all entanglements; we lock (our hearts) up safe in the coffin of ... selfishness.”*

Ernest Hemingway has become the spiritual guru of our times. Oh, his books aren't read much, but their theme has come to infect our culture. D. H. Lawrence said that all Hemingway's works could be summarized in one line: *“Avoid one thing only – getting connected to anyone.”* What he and we too often fail to remember is that there is a place which perfectly models such a life. It is in the Holy Land. It is a body of water that only receives water, and never gives any

away. It is called the Dead Sea. Need I say more?

“*What is truth?*” Pilate asked Jesus. He did not answer him then with words. But we have his words. “*Let not your hearts be troubled,*” he said; “*believe in God, believe also in me.... I am the way and the truth and the life. Love one another as I have loved you.*” (John 14: 1, 6; 15: 12) More than his words, however, we have his life – his life lived then in the 1st century, yes, but his life also as it is being lived now, in us and through us and all around us.

Thankfulness, Susan Williams’ friend wrote, **is what spoils everything when you leave it out.** It’s true. Don’t let it happen to you this year. Yes, in the words of that noble old hymn, “God our maker doth provide, for our wants to be supplied” ... Yes, “everything (in our lives) is safely gathered in, ‘ere the winter storms begin”. So come, then, as a thankful people, come, and raise the song of harvest home.