

For eleven years I served on the board of Hope-Net, a non-profit dedicated to eradicating hunger and homelessness in the city. I watched our food pantries grow in number and output as the need grew, and I got to know some of the amazing volunteers who worked at them.

One such person was “Dr. B.” Dr. B. has great enthusiasm for almost everything. He volunteers at one of our large pantries at an historic old gothic-style church on Wilshire Boulevard. He helps unload the pallets of food as they arrive at the side street door, and organizes them in the church basement. This particular pantry has a few racks that hold donated clothing, and he works to keep those looking organized. Dr. B knows the clientele on a first name basis, and has a smile for everyone, volunteers and board members as well. What I remember most was the clear, positive look that shone from his eyes, and his extraordinary energy that keeps him moving everywhere at once. There is still a picture of him that I took on Hope-Net’s website—taking bags of groceries out of the arms of a visiting board member from one of our wealthier churches, Bel Air Presbyterian, while talking with her as if they grew up together.

If Dr. B *has* a doctorate, it could only have been earned on the streets. Due to several illnesses and a lack of access to healthcare, he alternates between living in housing on his own, then in shelters, and then back on the streets again. The last time I saw him, he was holding on to his own room in a community home. That may have changed several times since then, as I am not in touch.

It might surprise him to hear this, but he and others like him that I have met over the years are some of the many from whom I learned the most. Perhaps we all have “Dr. B’s” in our lives—those individuals whose struggle is so much closer to the pavement than our own, yet who manage to meet their challenges head on with faith in a better day, one day at a time. They remind me of two things—first, that I have no right or cause to believe that I cannot overcome any difficulty that I face, especially when my own troubles are so much less than those the vast majority of people in the world encounter on a daily basis; and second, that I have an obligation to work for a more just system where such inequalities don’t exist.

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?”

Thanksgiving is days away. Are we feeling thankful?

We are involved in wars that feel destined to go on without end.

It was two years ago last month that the stock markets gave a mighty rumble and we saw that we were in for a ride. Two years is a long time to live with such instability and the fears and uncertainties that accompany it. Some among us have seen their retirement income shrink as interest rates rest on the bottom and portfolios have plunged. Some of you are working on reduced salaries, while others have lost employment, and for more than a few of us, that period has stretched on. It affects our families, our economy, and especially insidious is the way it eats at our sense of purpose and self worth. Is it possible that we can feel thankful this year?

I saw great signs of faith in our community as a whole last week as we took a brave and forward thinking step, and invited Elizabeth to help us become more of what we are called to be

as a congregation. It was a wonderful day. Do we have the same faith in our own personal abilities to move forward and overcome the presence of financial gloom and the subsequent feelings it engenders in our psyches; as that presence continues to occupy our homes like an unwanted guest?

The crash on Wall Street that triggered the Great Depression started in late October of 1929, and the market seesawed through the next month.

Thanksgiving Day was on November 28, 1929. There was a group of pastors from the Northeast who gathered together to talk about how they could approach the idea of celebrating Thanksgiving that year, let alone bring it into their Sunday worship services, as so many members of their congregation had lost their jobs, their fortunes, and their sense of security.

Things had gotten about as bad as they could get, with no sign of relief. Even with today's unsteady situation, eighty years ago this month there began a long period of bread lines and soup kitchens that touched many more lives than they do today. The term, "Great Depression" seemed an apt description for the mood of the country.

Well, these pastors initially decided that they should only touch lightly upon the subject of Thanksgiving in deference to the human misery all about them. After all, it appeared that there was little to be thankful for. Dr. William L. Stiger, the pastor of a large congregation in the city, rallied the other pastors. He declared that this was not the time to give mere passing mention to Thanksgiving, but just the opposite. This was the time for the nation to get matters in perspective and stop to be thankful for the blessings that were always present, but perhaps suppressed due to intense hardship.

These pastors struck upon something. The most intense moments of thankfulness are not found in times of plenty, but when difficulties abound.

"And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?"

I grew up with a large reproduction of a painting in our dining room of very staid Pilgrims trudging through the snow—extremely serious, yet bravely facing hardship.

In Nathaniel Philbrick's book "Mayflower," he paints a picture of the first Thanksgiving celebration far different from the one conjured up from both our "pro" and "anti" pilgrim mythology. It is true that they lost half of their number in the crossing and shortly after, leaving some fifty people to look after each other. They threw a party and invited people whose ways were different from theirs, and the party didn't end at a respectable hour after the cranberry dressing was gone. Philbrick describes a party that went on for a solid week, during which unusually enormous amounts of beer was consumed.

They were people without a country who had given everything and lost family along the way, but still there was thanksgiving to God. Their gratitude was not *for* something but *in* something.

It was that same sense of gratitude that lead Lincoln to formally establish the first Thanksgiving Day in the midst of national civil war, when the butcher's list of casualties seemed to have no end and the very nation struggled for survival.

Again, all around us are people who are facing real hardship. Why should we be thankful this day? I suggest three things:

We must learn to be thankful or we become bitter.

We must learn to be thankful or we will become discouraged.

We must learn to be thankful or we will grow arrogant and self-satisfied.<sup>1</sup>

Thanksgiving is a verb, not a noun. Although the day causes us to end up sedentary and sleepy, the purpose of the day is about an action—that of giving thanks for all of the blessings we have, in spite of what is happening in the world and in our own corner of that world.

At the end of today's scripture passage, it says, "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

It isn't about the trouble that we might imagine to be just ahead. It is about how we are equipped to face the trouble today without personalizing it, holding on to it, becoming emotional or distraught over it, and especially, without worrying about it. I give thanks for what we have today.

There is a story about a Thanksgiving dinner when all the relatives were assembled in the dining room, and the host father asked his little girl to give the table blessing. She became shy and said that she didn't know what to pray. The father said, "Just pray the way your mother did last night before supper." The little girl understood. She closed her eyes, raised her arms, and said, "Lord, why did I invite all those free-loaders to dinner?"

Thanksgiving is a verb, not a noun. Despite the worries that surround us in this world, what is it this week that we can actively give thanks for?

In a sermon at the same old church on Wilshire Boulevard where Dr. B works in the basement food pantry, a former Senior Minister, Gary Wilburn said: "In 1636, amid the darkness of the Thirty Years' War, a German pastor, Martin Rinkart, is said to have buried five thousand of his parishioners in one year, an average of fifteen a day. His parish was ravaged by war, death, and economic disaster. After burying his wife, in the heart of that darkness, with the cries of fear outside his window, he sat down and wrote this table grace for his children:

"Now thank we all our God  
With heart and hands and voices;  
Who wondrous things had done,  
In whom His world rejoices.  
Who, from our mother's arms,  
Hath led us on our way  
With countless gifts of love  
And still is ours today."

Here was someone who knew thanksgiving comes from within, not from outward circumstances.

Happy Thanksgiving, and this year Carl and I are once again thankful to have you in our lives. Amen.

### ***Sermon Resources***

1. The story of Dr. Stiger and the Thanksgiving preparations shortly after the stock market crash is based on an account by the Rev. Leonard Sweet, and I have taken and altered it to fit.



### Scripture for Sunday, November 20, 2009

#### *Matthew 6:25-33*

25 “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 28 And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? 31 Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” 32 For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.