

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: November 18, 2012
Sermon Title: Thank You
Scripture: Psalm 100
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Psalm 100

A Psalm of thanksgiving.
Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.

Know that the Lord is God.
It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the Lord is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

My flight to India three weeks ago today was the last to get out of JFK before it shut down. By the time I landed in India, there was a full-blown storm wreaking great destruction along the coastline, even loss of life. The torrential rains created massive flooding. Transportation was a mess. Business was ruined. Life was chaos. Everything was disrupted.

Now, of course, what I've just described is what you all were facing right here at home. Destruction. Devastation. Deprivation. By the time I landed in India, I was already getting e-mail reports and photos about what all of you

were facing. Ironically, I escaped JFK just in time and landed in India just in time ... for a cyclone! I escaped hurricane Sandy, only to run into Cyclone Nilam.

And yet, people were focused on us! On my second day I went to visit one of our very special projects, the very same home for the aged I told you about my last Sunday here. It's run by a devout elderly lady, a child bride/child widow, whose life was redeemed from sorrow by coming to Christ. Uneducated, illiterate, remote, and infirm and elderly, when she greeted me, she said in halting English, "I pray for America and Sandy." Seven thousand miles away in a mud-drenched village full of its own miseries, she was thanking God for America, remembering you and asking about our church.

Thanking God for America and Christianity was a recurring theme of this trip. I didn't go to India to be thanked. This really was a hard-working trip – tons of meetings, challenges, confrontations, strategies, opportunities, risks, demands, needs.

Yet, everywhere I went, there was gratitude, "Thanksgiving in truest sense." Thanks-giving ... giving thanks. To God. To us. To America. It's as though the whole trip was getting ready for our good old-fashioned New England holiday, Thanksgiving.

On Friday I was part of an interfaith Thanksgiving service at The Watermark, and I said to the group there, "I love Thanksgiving! It's the most New England of holidays, started just up the road in Massachusetts. The most Congregationalist of holidays, started by Pilgrims, our spiritual forebears.

I remember once attending a nationwide meeting of Congregationalists up there in Plymouth. At one point we all marched to Plymouth Rock, staring at it like our Holy Grail, the touchstone of our roots, the symbol of our spiritual pilgrimage that brought us out of oppression and tyranny in search of freedom.

The story of the Pilgrims and the Native Americans is filled with myths and legends and constant revisions and historical analysis. Nathaniel Philbrick's *Mayflower* is well worth reading, and Alida's "Book Chat" tonight is on Geraldine Brooks's *Caleb's Crossing*, a powerful re-imagining of that Pilgrim era. But within all that fog and mist of ancient history, of one thing we can be quite certain. One day, those early Congregationalists got down on their knees and thanked God. It was their nature. They thanked God for "providence," for getting through another year, for food and sustenance, for getting through the storms of life, for friends, for one another, for their Indian neighbors, for cooperation and effort, for the very breath of life.

Thanksgiving was in their nature. They knew their Bible. St. Paul said, "Be thankful (Colossians 3:15) "Give thanks in all circumstances. (1 Thessalonians 5:18) Deuteronomy says, "When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord! (Deuteronomy 8:10) and the Psalms declare, "Come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our maker. Let us come before God with Thanksgiving." (Psalm 95) "Enter his gates with thanksgiving, give thanks to him and praise his name." (Psalm 100:4).

So it's not hard to imagine those Pilgrims, those early Congregationalists, taking a moment, taking a knee, "Tebowing," before it was popular to say to God, "Thanks." I also love Thanksgiving because it's the purest of holidays. Most other holidays get crowded out by other stuff – like Santa and the Easter Bunny and shopping. And all that's fine. I'm not against that. But Thanksgiving is still pretty much about thanks-giving. It's unavoidable.

I love Easter, but who knows what the word "Easter" even means? And "Christmas," even if we break it down, "Christ-Mas," what's that? But "Thanksgiving" ... you can't even say "thanksgiving" without giving thanks. Still, when it happens, it can be a nice surprise.

I visited a little out-of-the-way school in a dusty little town that FOCI, through the Starr family, has been helping little by little. The kids sang a lovely thank-you song for us. A few days later, the school principal hitched a ride, six hours, just to find me again to tell me, "Say to Mr. John Starr, 'thank you.'"

I visited two more projects. A brand-new home for orphaned kids impacted by AIDS and a learning center for abused women. We played with the kids, we talked with the women, all filled with joy ... and thanks-giving. Not for me. I hadn't done anything, it was just inside them and came bubbling out. I was asked to judge a "salad dressing contest." Now, all you world travelers know that the first rule is *never eat the salad*. So all I could think about was a month's worth of dysentery! But I smiled and agreed to judge the salad dressing contest. It turns out it really was "salad dressing contest"! All the women had competed in "dressing up" fruits and vegetables, carving, designing, creating whole village scenes of animals and flowers and even Mr. Potato Head, a whole salad dressed up for the show! Even the losers were grateful. It's as if gratitude was in the air everywhere.

But my biggest surprise was all the thanks I kept hearing directed at America and Christianity. I kept running into all these Indian men and women – successful, wealthy, and determined to do a lot of good. And when I asked them how they became successful and why they wanted to do good,

I kept hearing about America and Christianity. Many had been to America, studied here, lived here, worked here. I kept hearing about Stanford, Utah State, University of Michigan, and Wisconsin.

At the new center for abused women, their first funding partners were IBM and the Rotary Club. And they kept talking about the impact of Christianity, the EXAMPLE of Christianity, mission schools and mission hospitals in India. And how in America, they always saw churches doing good – feeding the hungry, helping the poor, demanding justice, loving others. They liked that. They wanted to BE like that. Even non-Christians. I asked one person why they were doing what they were doing, and the woman said, “In America, if you saw a problem like this, this is what they would do, right?”

On the day I left India, my daughter and family drove me to the airport, and we went by a HUGE Islamic billboard, advertising a free Koran for everyone. But that's not what grabbed my attention. What grabbed my attention was their offer to introduce people to the “God of Love.” An Islamic billboard. Promoting the God of Love. If I had had just one more day in India, I would've sought those folks out and had a terrific conversation together. But for now, I don't know if that's just some smart new marketing campaign, good PR rebranding, or if Christianity is rubbing off on folks. All I know is I saw plenty of evidence of Christianity making a difference. I saw Christians applying Christianity. I saw non-Christians emulating Christianity. And I saw a Muslim billboard echoing Christianity. And everywhere I went, I saw thanks-giving. And it rubbed off on me!

I've often confessed to you that in my prayer life, I'm mostly a whiner and a beggar. I whine about the bad stuff, and I beg for the good stuff. And I hardly ever stop to say, “thank you,” even when the bad stuff doesn't happen and the good stuff does. But on this trip, there was so much gratitude, it rubbed off on me. After every flight, I said, “thank you.” After every meeting, every encounter, “thank you.” After every meal, piled high with Indian food (which I hate), I said, “thank you.” After every mile driven on notorious Indian roads, I said, “thank you.” Literally! Along those deathtraps, there are 1-kilometer markers every kilometer, and at each one I said, “thank you.”

And I met with a whole bunch of students we'd helped over the years, young men and women making their marks in the world and choosing to do good, to make a difference. Every single one of them said, “thank you.” They even gave me money to help more people. I started to feel like the Pilgrims of long ago or like the real Indians all around me or like the worshipers of ancient Israel who all knew enough to “Come before the Lord our maker, with thanks-giving.”

Let me close with this: the New York Mets pitcher R. A. Dickey just won the Cy Young Award as the best pitcher in the National League. For baseball, he's an old guy, 37. He's had a mostly lousy, barely mediocre career. Only a few years ago, he set the record for most home runs given up in a game and was sent to the Minors the next day. Now he's the best pitcher in the League.

He's odd in a lot of different ways: a knuckleball pitcher, bearded, a mountain climber, a writer, and a very serious Christian. Maybe that's what made him say one of the most interesting sentences I've ever read. After winning the award, he said, "There have been countless people who poured into me ... this is a victory for all of us." Don't you love that expression of gratitude? *There have been countless people who poured into me.*

That's what all those people in India were saying to me. That's what all the folks down near the beach have been saying about all the helpers Alida organized. That's what all the families who receive the massive amounts of food we've collected will be saying. That's what any American worth the name says every day. That's what all of us will be saying around the Thanksgiving table this week. "There have been countless people who poured into me."

And all of it starts with God.