

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: November 22, 2015
Sermon Title: Remember, Give Thanks
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Deuteronomy 8:6-11

Deuteronomy 8:6-11

Therefore keep the commandments of the LORD your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him. For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. You shall eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land that he has given you.

Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today.

At 6:30 on yesterday morning, I heard a much better Thanksgiving sermon on NPR than you're about to get, which is a sad confession to make, but there it is. The program was called "The Science of Gratitude," hosted by the actress Susan Sarandon. It comes out of the University of California at Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center. It made three clear points: Gratitude is good for students, good for workers, and good for the dying.

Students who are grateful and in an environment of appreciation get better grades. Workers who work in a place that expresses gratitude become more grateful and work better. And grateful people face dying in a whole different way, remembering the good, the better, and the best of their lives, not the worst.

God knew that a long time ago, The Bible in its pages from 5,000 years ago all the way up to 2,000 years ago, said it. You and I, in our gut, we knew it all along. Now, science agrees with us. Grateful people in a grateful environment live better in every way.

Now, on to my inferior sermon.

I love Thanksgiving! It's my favorite holiday in large part because it's our purest holiday. Christmas gets all caught up with Santa Claus, Easter has chocolate and the Easter Bunny. All Saints' Day has become Halloween. Memorial Day is just a long weekend. But Thanksgiving is still what it says it is: Thanks-giving, a day for giving thanks.

It took on extra meaning when I went away to prep school up in Western Massachusetts at age 13. Our first break, our first holiday in the school year, was Thanksgiving. A train would stop in a field a mile or so outside campus. We'd climb on, the train would take us to Grand Central Station, and I'd catch the subway to Queens. By then it was night, and I'd walk to the local synagogue or to my church.

My dad and the rabbi were best friends, and they had begun Thanksgiving Eve services, alternating houses of worship. When it was at the synagogue, my father preached; when it was at our church, the rabbi preached. For all those years of prep school and college, my Thanksgiving began when I walked into either place of worship, when I sat with friends, family, neighborhood kids, and all together we gave thanks. It was the natural order of things. There's something intrinsic about Thanksgiving, innate, it's as though it's in our DNA. We know we should give thanks; even when we don't, we know we should.

Our Confirmation class is one of the delights of our ministry. This year we have almost 40 8th-graders, every Monday, full of vinegar, ideas and questions and energy bursting out. Sometimes I don't know if they're going to keep me young or make me die young, but we love every minute of it. One evening we turned out the lights and I asked them to imagine: it's 10,000 years ago. They know nothing. No TV, no computers, no school, no books. They are at the dawn of civilization, the beginning of human history. They know nothing. It's late at night. They're sitting in a cave. What do they talk about?

Well, it's a little awkward at first, some giggling, a few jokes, but pretty soon they're into it. They start to wonder, to question, to think. And one of the things they get to quickly is that much of life seems beyond their control. So who *is* in control? Things like rain and sun and harvest and life itself. Where

does it come from? What's the right amount? Who decides? Before you know it, they have religion. Religion is an attempt to make sense of the world, to bring some order to it all, to make life less random, more reliable. It's a short skip and a jump to the idea of God, and once they have that idea of God, they immediately figure out they want God on their side, they want God's help.

Now, these Confirmation kids are 13, 14 years old. They know how to get what they want: by praise, gratitude, kissing up, performing well, being nice. *Not* whining. Gratitude. So in this little Confirmation cave exercise, they come up with plans to show God gratitude. Give God some food, put out some water, bake some cookies, bow down, or shout, "Hey, thanks."

Our Scripture today gets to the heart of gratitude. I'm sure I've heard this Scripture many, many times before, but I first remember hearing it—really hearing it—a few years ago when our church hosted the Fairfield Interfaith Thanksgiving service. A local rabbi gave the sermon, based on today's Scripture. We can summarize it as "Remember, and give thanks." They go together: Remember, and give thanks.

In fact, that's almost the summary of most of the Old Testament: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, most of the Psalms, lots of the Prophets. Remember, and give thanks. God keeps saying, "Remember what I did for you, remember where you came from, remember how you got here, remember who you are, remember when things were bad, remember why you made it through." And just to be sure, God gives them some good reminders: Remember when you were homeless, remember when you were refugees, remember when you were slaves, remember when you were lost, hungry, attacked, fearful, doubtful? In short, "Remember me," God says. And then, "give thanks." And God provides a pretty good list in Deuteronomy. Give thanks for a good land, streams and rivers, valleys and mountains, wheat and barley, vines and figs, pomegranates, olive oil, honey, iron, copper, and bread, herds and flocks, large flourishing cities, houses filled with all kinds of good things." That's a powerful combination: "Remember, and give thanks."

"Remember where you came from. Give thanks for pomegranates."
"Remember how you got here. Give thanks for a good land." "Remember what got you through. Give thanks for houses filled with good things."
"Remember who stood by you. Give thanks for rivers, barley, and wine."

This is a really powerful Biblical approach to life, isn't it? "Remember, and give thanks." I can't help but wonder if that approach wouldn't turn a lot of lives around, a lot of the world, a lot of this nation around. I don't think most

of America (I'm not talking about you personally), but I don't think most of America gives much thought to where we came from, how we got here, who stood by us, and what we have. There's a great old hymn that tries to capture this big Biblical theology. We'll sing it at the end of church today. It's called "Count Your Blessings."

*Count your blessings, name them one by one,
Count your blessings, see what God has done!
Count your blessings, name them one by one,
Count your many blessings, see what God has done.*

Try it in your own life. In fact, try it around your Thanksgiving table on Thursday. Seriously, you've got two, six, nine, 15 of your favorite people; after the turkey and before the pie, why not "Count your blessings, name them one by one, count your many blessings, see what God hath done"?

And, for the occasional atheist at the table, fine, "Count your many blessings, see what you have done all by yourself with no help from anyone." Or, "See what your mother hath done for you." Or your birthright or blind luck or hard work. But come on, everybody, switch off the negative. It's boring. Our public religion is negative; our public discourse is negative. And look at our presidential election campaign. You and I can all summarize it: I'm stupid, you're bad, the country's rotten. Well, no, I'm not that stupid, you're not that bad, the country's not rotten. As a matter of fact, if you put that 3,000-year-old Deuteronomy Scripture up next to a picture of America, it's a perfect match: "a good land, streams and rivers, valleys, mountains, iron, copper and bread, wheat and barley, honey and herds and flocks, pomegranates and figs."

Well, I'm not sure about the pomegranates and figs, but flourishing cities and houses filled with good things? Those we have. And we can add a bunch of intangibles: freedom, tolerance, feistiness, opportunity, ingenuity, hustle, energy, ideas. That's quite a country!

I'm not Pollyanna. I'm not naïve. I'm just wondering if the best use of Thanksgiving dinner is to sit around swapping a list of woes: whining, backstabbing, bemoaning, grumbling, finger-pointing. To what end?

I think most of us here are familiar with the Book of Job. Now, there's a guy who had a right to complain. He lost everything; every iota of anything he'd ever had got taken away, unjustly. Most of the Book of Job is exactly what you'd expect: there's a lot of commiserating, whining, blaming, raging. And then, finally, Job stops. Takes a deep breath. Thinks. And Job decides to

“remember and give thanks.” It’s a humble Job who finds the rest of his life blessed beyond measure.

Ah, “but that’s the Bible,” you say, “that’s not the real world.” O.K., Try this. At our high school youth group Thursday night, Alida played a two-minute video taken off the Facebook page of a young dad from Paris. The love of his life, the mother of his 17-month-old child, his wife, Helene, was murdered by the Islamic terrorists last week. This husband, this widower, this young dad addressed an open letter to ISIS. I know what *my* “open letter” would say. There would be lots of nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs. Pithy, rage-filled, lots of exclamation points, bitter promises of revenge in this life and the next. Curses. I mean *real* curses, not four-letter words. I mean eternal curses. It would be a masterpiece of hate.

That’s not what this young, grieving Parisian widower wrote. He said, “I don’t know who you are. I don’t want to know. You are dead souls. If this God for whom you blindly kill made us in his image, then every bullet in the body of my wife is a wound in [God’s] heart. So, NO, I will not grant you the gift of my hatred. To respond to hatred with anger would be to fall victim to the same ignorance that made you what you are. Of course, I am devastated by grief, but it will be short. I know that [Helene] will join us each day, and we’ll find each other in the paradise of free souls to which YOU will have no access. We are two, my son and I. I don’t have any more time to give you. He’s waking up from his nap, barely 17 months old, but all his life this little boy will have the nerve to be happy and free. Because, no, you won’t have his hatred either.”

That’s real. That’s not some preacher, some ancient Scripture, some noble character out of literature. That’s a real-time Job . . . who doesn’t have time for the murderers of his wife, who doesn’t have time for hate. Instead, he “counts [his] blessings,” he “names them one by one,” the love of his life, the joy of heaven, and the delight of his son. If he can muster that much gratitude in the face of life’s worst sadness, then, my goodness, we owe it to him to have a truly great Thanksgiving.

Let’s join together and sing that great old hymn, “Count Your Blessings.”

*When upon life’s billows you are tempest-tossed,
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,
Count your many blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.*

Refrain:

*Count your blessings, name them one by one,
Count your blessings, see what God has done!*

*Count your blessings, name them one by one,
Count your many blessings, see what God has done.*

*Are you ever burdened with a load of care?
Does the cross seem heavy you are called to bear?
Count your many blessings, every doubt will fly,
And you will keep singing as the days go by.*

*When you look at others with their lands and gold,
Think that Christ has promised you His wealth untold;
Count your many blessings money cannot buy
Your reward in heaven, nor your home on high.*

*So, amid the conflict whether great or small,
Do not be discouraged, God is over all;
Count your many blessings, angels will attend,
Help and comfort give you to your journey's end.*

