

FALL 2015 // LIPSCOMB NOW:

INTERSECTIONS

OF FAITH & CULTURE

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**Baptisms on the beach in
Trinidad on a mission trip by
Lipscomb's men's soccer team.**

FALL 2015 // **LIPSCOMB NOW:**

INTERSECTIONS

OF FAITH & CULTURE

Volume 3 Number 2

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Be thankful for the life-changing moments

This semester marked the 10-year anniversary of my service at Lipscomb University. As I reflect upon the successes and challenges I have faced serving in this role, one of my greatest joys has been the opportunity to see firsthand what a difference this Christian community makes in the lives of our students, faculty, staff, alumni and friends. For all who choose to walk their journeys and share their lives with us at Lipscomb, I am most thankful.

In these 10 years, Rhonda and I have had the honor of supporting Lipscomb families in times of great celebration and deep sorrow. We have attended weddings and baptisms, missionary send-off parties and, of course, graduation ceremonies. It is such a privilege to share in these moments when life-changing commitments and new beginnings are commemorated. We have also shared life's most challenging times with our Lipscomb family. We have walked alongside those grieving when loved ones die, and we have offered support for those struggling to cope with other types of loss and sadness. It is in these dark times when I often have witnessed our Christian community at its best.

Earlier this fall, our six-week-old grandson was admitted to the intensive care unit at Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt, where he was diagnosed with bacterial meningitis. Luke received excellent care at one of the nation's premier pediatric hospitals, and we were blessed to have a very special



President L. Randolph Lowry's young grandson Luke joined him on stage at Lipscomb's Convocation service in September.

nurse on Luke's medical team. When she first came into Luke's room, she introduced herself as Maggie Cavender to the many family members present, and then she turned to me and told me she knew who I was. I was "her president," she said. We were delighted to learn that Maggie is a nursing student at Lipscomb. Maggie not only provided Luke with excellent health care but also comforted us with her concern for our family's emotional and spiritual well-being, encouraging us and providing us with a sense of peace in that difficult moment. She personified Christian faith that bears compassion and confidence in God's presence in all circumstances.

The number of friends and colleagues who came to the hospital or sent cards, flowers and gifts was tremendous. Although it was one of the most difficult few weeks for our family, it was also one of the most awe-inspiring. We are so very thankful for this community that surrounds us with an unceasing, palpable love derived from our shared faith. Luke has recovered remarkably well, and we

have all now returned to our normal daily routines. I will long remember those who walked that particular journey with us and will forever consider their presence in that moment a great blessing.

Today, I am most thankful to know the joy that comes from bearing one another's burdens, and pray that each of you have a similar family of supporters who bless one another to the glory of God.

L. Randolph Lowry
President
Lipscomb University



P.S. If you find this publication helpful, please do two things: email comments and suggestions to jenna.schrader@lipscomb.edu and pass it on to a ministry friend!

Practicing thankfulness with children

“Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life and turns what we have into enough, and more.” – Melody Beattie

If you Google “thankfulness” and “children,” you will discover a plethora of articles on how to train your children in gratitude and thankfulness. Raising thankful children is one of the most desired—yet difficult—tasks of parenting in our North American cultural context, where basic necessities (and more) are so easily accessible.

In this article, it is suggested that thankfulness is a spiritual discipline that enables us to model gratitude before our children, as well as be thankful with the children in our midst.

The late Henri Nouwen writes of gratitude and thankfulness:

“In the past I always thought of gratitude as a spontaneous response to the awareness of gifts received, but now I realize that gratitude can also be lived as a discipline. The discipline of gratitude is the explicit effort to acknowledge that all I am and have is given to me as a gift of love.”

The simple act of giving thanks has the potential of widening our capacity for discovering the sacred in our lives. But how do we model this for children?

Widening capacity for thankfulness

Our children are watching us and observing how we model thankfulness in our daily lives. Holly Allen shares this story from one of her college students:

“When I was ten, my mom had twin baby boys. Life was crazy for a long time, but when Scottie and Ross were six months old, my mom and I sat down together one morning and wrote a whole bunch of notes to people thanking them for how they had helped us ever since the boys came. My mom let me address the

envelopes and put the stamps on. Sometimes my mom would stop writing and talk about how Mrs. Roberts had brought over a dozen boxes of diapers, or how the senior ladies’ class brought us Sunday dinner for three months. She kept crying; I didn’t know what to think, but I knew it was important to write to everybody.”

Small yet intentional habits like hand writing notes through tears of gratitude, saying grace before meals, counting our blessings, or a thank-you prayer at bedtime for the blessings of the day all serve as place markers for the deeper gratitude our children will develop as they mature.

In Trevecca Okholm’s book, *Kingdom Family*, she tells the story of a young mother who got an idea while changing her children’s sheets and flipping mattresses. She invited her small children (then aged

5, 4 and 2) to come into their rooms where she took a permanent marker and wrote enduring prayers of thankfulness on the slats of their bed frames. These hidden, yet present prayers serve as a constant reminder of thankfulness and God’s provision in their lives.

The practice of wondering together

The act of asking wondering questions encourages contemplation on the biblical story and reflection on thankfulness. When we read biblical stories, such as that of the ten lepers (Luke 17) and invite children to wonder why one man came back to say thank you or to wonder how it must have felt to be healed, we create space for our children to recognize the place of gratitude in their own lives.

Wondering together with our children in light of the refugee crisis in Europe or homelessness here in the United States can draw our children to the plight of others as well as to

Holly Allen

*Professor of Family Studies and
Christian Ministries
Lipscomb University*



the commonplace yet abundant blessings they themselves experience every day: "I wonder how that family is finding food to eat?" "I wonder where they will sleep tonight?" Initially these wondering questions may simply direct the eyes and hearts of our children to those suffering; the questions may not yield concrete response at first. Perhaps sometime later, when your child sees a homeless person standing with a banged-up grocery cart, she may ask, "I wonder what they have in their cart? Will it be enough for their dinner?" Eventually, we can ask, "I wonder what we would do if we were where they are?" Wondering together with your child can lead them toward an others-focused mindset—fostering a desire to help those who are struggling, and along the way, a deepening awareness of the ordinary blessings of our lives.

The practice of paying attention

In her book, *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of Moses turning aside from his task of driving sheep to pay attention to a bush. Taking time out to encounter the burning bush allowed Moses the opportunity to discover God's purpose in his life. Among the biggest obstacles to living thankfully with our children in our world today is that we perpetually feel pressed for time. Diverted by our rushed lives and our need to be entertained, we may miss the opportunities to be mindful of the blessings and the burning bushes along our way, and thus miss opportunities to share these with our children.

Recently when Okholm's four-year-old granddaughter was visiting her, they read together the parable of the hidden treasure from Matthew 13. After reading, her granddaughter asked enthusiastically if they could go on a treasure hunt in the backyard. Looking for signs and wonders of God's creation and taking time to pay attention to the world around them, they quietly discovered tiny flowers blooming among the blades of grass, unusual designs on rocks and spider webs among the succulents, thereby giving the child the opportunity to experience awe and gratitude for God's gifts of wonder.

Cultivating thankfulness begins with patience and a widening of our capacity to wait and watch for grace to appear. As parents and grandparents and anyone who spends time with children, it behooves us to cultivate the art of paying attention, a habit that is in short supply in our wired and active culture today. It is ever so much more valuable than simply telling our children to say "please" and "thank you."

Every few years, social learning theorists remind us that it is still true that children tend to emulate the behaviors and practices they see modeled before them in their parents and teachers. Another recent study reiterates this same truism in terms of spiritual disciplines. Loren Marks reported the results of his first study exploring sacred practices of religious families in terms of three central themes. He described his first theme as "practicing what you preach."

One of the participants in the study, an African American Christian father of three, said:

"It's not just what you do in the [church] building; it's what you do outside the building, too. When everyday life struggles challenge you, are you able to overcome adversity; are you able to withstand the things that are being thrown at you? Are you practicing what you preach?"

Gratitude is one of those practices. In fact, as we noted earlier, gratitude is a spiritual discipline. Expressing gratitude, wondering together with our children at the hurt and loss around us and taking the time to pay attention to what God is actively doing in this world are ways to cultivate the spiritual discipline of thankfulness in ourselves and in our children.

This article was written with Ben Espinoza, community life pastor at Covenant Church in Bowling Green, Ohio, and Trevecca Okholm, adjunct professor in practical theology with an emphasis in family ministry at Azusa Pacific University and Certified Christian Educator in the Presbyterian Church/USA.

Children's Spirituality Conference to be held in June

Lipscomb University will host the fifth Children's Spirituality Conference: Christian Perspectives, June 12-14, 2016.

Held by the Society for Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, the conference will feature workshops to broaden understanding and transform the ways churches nurture children on their spiritual journeys and to explore ministry models that vividly demonstrate spiritually formative approaches.

Keynote speakers will be Almeda Wright, Yale Divinity School; Robbie Castleman, John Brown University; Dave Csinos, president, Faith Forward; and Pamela Ebstyn King, Fuller Theological Seminary.

Participants will have opportunities to interact with scholars and practitioners involved in children's spirituality, including dialogue with plenary speakers in evening talk-back sessions.

The Society for Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives is an ecumenical organization of academics and practitioners dedicated to promoting informed practice regarding children's spirituality.

The conference costs between \$225 and \$275 to attend, not including room and meal costs. Housing is available on the Lipscomb campus for \$65-\$115 or at local hotels near campus.

For more information on attending the Children's Spirituality Conference log on to www.childrenspirit.org.

Goodwill is a place of redemption

Intersections' Jenna Schrader sat down with Matthew Bourlakas, president and CEO of Goodwill Industries of Middle Tennessee, to discuss the work and spiritual foundation of the nonprofit organization. Goodwill sells donated goods to provide employment and training opportunities for people who have disabilities and others who have trouble finding and keeping jobs. The organization employs more than 2,100 people and serves 48 counties throughout Middle and West Tennessee. The organization operates 36 retail stores, including an outlet store, more than 80 donation sites and 29 Career Solutions Centers.

Intersections: *What makes Goodwill stand apart from other charitable organizations?*

Bourlakas: People who come into Goodwill to find work come from a place of hopelessness. Our leaders have to find charity in someone's situation and leave their judgments at the door. But at the same time, it's our responsibility to help them understand they are crossing the divide from where they have been to where they could go.

For the most part, what I see and experience from those who do cross that divide is thankfulness. You can see it in the way they approach their job. You can see it in the way they relate to the community and to their coworkers. They understand that Goodwill is a place of redemption.

Intersections: *Is Goodwill considered "rehabilitative"?*

Bourlakas: Being a student in the Goodwill training program (called Career Solutions) is rehabilitative through the work an individual does and also by connecting people back into the society from which they have been disconnected, marginalized or even considered as a drag on society. The true rehabilitation process comes in the personal discovery that an individual can be someone different than they were when they walked into Career Solutions.

MATTHEW BOURLAKAS
President & CEO of Goodwill
Industries of Middle Tennessee



Intersections: *What are the main groups of people who look to Goodwill as an opportunity for a life change?*

Bourlakas: The majority of people we serve are unemployed or underemployed, and are experiencing difficulty finding and keeping a job. They may be unemployed due to a layoff or company downsizing, may have had a long absence from work, may have a disability or may have a criminal background. Others may lack a high school diploma or specialized occupation skills needed by local businesses.

According to our written history, our founder, Rev. Edgar J. Helms, believed in giving people a chance and not charity. The people he hired found success through their own efforts, and with work, they gained the dignity that comes with earning a paycheck." His early words to Goodwill were: "To be dissatisfied with your work until every handicapped or disabled person is given the opportunity to enjoy a maximum of abundant living." Recently, Goodwill has expanded that statement to include everyone who has a barrier to abundant living or is unfortunate, believing that everybody—if given the opportunity—can become productive and useful in life.



Q&A

Intersections: *How can someone best support the Goodwill community?*

Bourlakas: Many are called to acts of generosity and are eager to support those who are striving for a better life. For me, I believe Goodwill is one of those organizations that can do the most good because you are actually giving someone the opportunity to work, which is a gift that keeps on giving. Individuals in the Career Solutions program also have an opportunity to advance. It's not just giving someone a job, but providing an opportunity to create something he or she once thought impossible.

For example, we recently had a client who had multiple barriers to employment. No one would hire him. Goodwill took him in and put him through job training, where he received certifications in various skills areas. Eventually he got hired by a restaurant. As a result, he used everything he learned at Goodwill within the job at the restaurant and later opened up his own business. A barbecue business! Ownership. I think Goodwill is an organization that endeavors to take the generosity from others (their goods), and through the sale of those donated goods, create an opportunity to change the lives of others seeking a better future who have had struggles along the way. Giving (donating) to Goodwill does the most good.

Intersections: *I see that the training Goodwill provides is a large percentage of the company's efforts, not just operating the stores.*

Bourlakas: Yes, that is the mission. Job training. There are almost 30 Career Solutions Centers across Middle and West Tennessee. Those locations provide opportunities for people to simply walk through the door and say to one of the career counselors on staff, "I'd like to go to work." Next, an initial intake begins to assess what knowledge, skills and abilities the person already has. The counselor also finds out what the job seeker is interested in so they can put together a game plan. Some might need an updated resume; others might need help reentering a job market they've been out of for a few years. Goodwill, via Career Solutions, offers various certification programs and classes, free of charge.

Wherever somebody is on their path, it first takes their willingness to walk through the door and intend to change their life. Goodwill requires a committed person to come forth to desire to change their life. Once the first step is taken, Goodwill honors their willingness and efforts. We believe "anyone who has a desire to work can be placed somewhere." And at the end of the day, we all need a purpose and a drive for living and using any gift we can offer the world—no matter how grand or how humble. Without purpose we lose hope. Without hope, that's where people tend to withdraw and lose the desire to connect in a meaningful way. For Goodwill to be a part of intervening in someone's life, that's heroic and inspiring to me.

It's also inspiring when a child can be proud of their parents and see their father or mother fix breakfast and go to work like all their other friends' parents. They then see that as something they can achieve. It perpetuates a new pattern of being a successfully functioning adult. The adults benefit not only through their paycheck, but by living an exemplary life their children can be proud of.

“Goodwill believes that paid, productive work is integral to the positive self-esteem of individuals and to the success of the communities in which those individuals live.”

Intersections: *Does Goodwill get thank-you letters from people who have completed the program?*

Bourlakas: Letters do come in, yes, but all I have to do on a daily basis is walk out of my office and walk down into the plant, or walk into a store, and I'll witness the hard work and appreciation of hundreds of people who once thought that their futures were bleak or hopeless. I don't have to go too far to find the success stories because they are all around me every day. Gratitude and camaraderie amongst employees abounds because many workers share the same backgrounds.

It is important for me to do everything I can to break down barriers between those of us who walk on carpet and those of who don't. We have to understand we are more united in our commonalities, in our sins, in our striving for redemption. We are just in different stages. The more we acknowledge and accept that we are no better than those who are at a different level economically or materially, we can cultivate empathy and compassion and hope in those working within the Goodwill program.

Intersections: *How does Goodwill incorporate spirituality?*

Bourlakas: Spirituality is a broad concept with room for many perspectives. In general, it includes a sense of connection to something bigger than ourselves and typically involves a search for meaning in life. Goodwill's purpose has always been to provide employment training for individuals, which often leads to the development of a healthy self-esteem and a sense of purpose in one's life.

Goodwill employees share what the organization has instilled in them:

Self-respect, dignity, hope, redemption, confidence, and purpose

Intersections: *What is the Good Life Manager?*

Bourlakas: The Good Life Manager offers additional resources to employees who need help or guidance. Financial struggles, medical problems, health issues... It's when simply offering a job isn't enough. We have to support individuals at any level we can: job training, certificate programs and life management, among other areas. We seek to understand all the barriers that prohibit an individual from being the best they can be. If they are the best they can be, then Goodwill can be the best it can be.

Intersections: *How has Goodwill become so successful?*

Bourlakas: The people we represent have made us great. Our success is found in the people who have been given a new opportunity in life, who have been granted forgiveness and offered redemption, who are thankful that someone cares about them without judgment and sees who they could become. Seeing one's potential instead of past failures is a key to our success.

"Do you see me?" is how many potential Goodwill employees feel about their presence in the world. And Goodwill exists to say, "We do see you! And we see ability in you beyond what you can see." This is part of how I live out my spiritual responsibility in the world. And I'm never disappointed in what shows up.

To read inspiring success stories of Goodwill employees, go to giveit2goodwill.org.



As one of the very first social enterprises, Goodwill has been helping people, communities and the environment since 1902.

Goodwill took root in 1902 when a minister recognized a need and helped people in his community find meaningful work opportunities. The Rev. Edgar J. Helms worked as a missionary in the slums of Boston. He would gather burlap sacks and visit the wealthier residents in his community, asking for items they no longer needed or wanted. After collecting the donations, the Rev. Helms took the items to his church where people, in need of work, repaired what was broken and then sold the used goods. The workers found success through their own efforts, and with work they gained the dignity that comes with earning a paycheck. The Goodwill movement swept the country and, in 1957, Goodwill Industries of Middle Tennessee, Inc. was formed. The revenue generated from the sale of donated goods enables Goodwill Industries of Middle Tennessee to assist tens of thousands of people each year with training and job placement services at its 29 Goodwill Career Solutions Centers. Your donations are changing lives.



View our annual report
giveit2goodwill.org/annualreport





Happy Holidays...?

Nothing seems better than the holiday season. The fun and excitement builds month after month from the moment the leaves fall in October until New Year's Eve. Trick-or-treating at Halloween. Feasting at Thanksgiving. Gift giving at Christmas. Ringing in the New Year with friends and loved ones. Holidays are a high point to the year. It simply doesn't get any better than celebrating these months with anticipation and joy.

For some of us.

For the many of us, though, the holiday season can be a time of dread and sadness. The hurried and harried hosting; the strained relationships; dealing with grief and loss. Frankly, pretending to be happy with forced smiles and canned laughs can be a little too much. White-knuckling it from Halloween to New Year's can drain every last bit of soul energy right out of a person. Some of us wonder whether we can endure one more holiday season.

Three of the most common kinds of holiday stress include hosting guests, family relationships and grief. Usually these holiday stresses are simply unavoidable, but they do not have to be unbearable. If your highest hope for the holiday season is to just "get through it," here is a little help.

Hosting stress. Every family has one—the person who takes on all holiday duties: cooks all the meals, makes sure the beds are ready for

overnights guests, washes all the dishes and gets a few loads of laundry done to boot. This person runs herself ragged making sure everyone else is having a great holiday. Is this person you? The good news is that you are doing a great service to the family. The bad news is that you are tired, underappreciated and feeling like a martyr. After all, if you don't do it, who else will? Well, I have one word for you: *delegate*. Of course, no one else is going to do it ALL, but divvying up holiday chores will provide some relief. For example, you could ask a family member to cook just one of the meals. Their meal might not be what you envisioned. It might even end up being hot dogs rather than the roast beef and mashed potatoes you usually prepare. Take a step back and say, "Oh well, at least we were all together."

Family stress. Sometimes unresolved hurts in families go ignored, are forgotten or are avoided throughout the year. But when the march (dirge?) of holidays ensues and everyone is obligated to get together, these mutually agreed upon avoidance patterns get put to the test. The mere presence of certain people in the family exacerbates old wounds. Sometimes the tension noticeably thickens around the Thanksgiving table, and rather than giving thanks, you want to pour the entire dish of molten gravy on Uncle Kevin's lap—accidentally, of course. Unresolved hurts bring a dark cloud over the whole holiday experience, and rather than savoring the joy of time together, you count the minutes until you can leave without being overly offensive.



Chris Gonzalez

Assistant Professor of Psychology,
Lipscomb University
Director, Marriage and Family
Therapy Program

When there are unresolved issues between family members, all is not lost. There are at least two strategies for a better holiday:

1. Initiate reconciliation. This means talking about the issue in humble, non-blaming and solution-oriented conversations. The hope is for mutual ownership of the problem and the intention to go forward learning better how the other would like to be treated.

2. Forgiveness. Sometimes the other family member is not the least bit interested in reconciliation or does not even believe anything needs to be reconciled. In that case, forgiveness is the best pathway. Forgiveness does not mean that the offense was actually acceptable. That is counterfeit forgiveness. Real, genuine and life-giving forgiveness means that you have decided it is not your responsibility to make that other person pay for their offense. It is off your plate. When you relieve yourself of having to be the psychological cop, you free up a lot of emotional space. This can invite a more enjoyable holiday season into your life.

Loss and grief. Holidays are extremely difficult after losing a loved one, often for many years after the loss. The grief brings a sense of hopelessness that makes celebrating anything seem near impossible. Your loved one's place at the table is empty. Their voice is absent. New memories with the departed will not be forthcoming. The gap left by their absence can feel like a black hole swirling in the middle of the living room, sucking the potential for new memories to emerge with those who are present. For some families, talking about those who have passed away is taboo. For other families, everything about the holiday is cause for expressing the memory of

the lost loved one. Each individual and family deals with loss in a unique way through processes and patterns learned through counseling, experience or instinct. These family processes promote the way some family members grieve while marginalizing the way other family members grieve.

When gathering for the holidays after the loss of a loved one, even if it is a few years after the loss, it is important to be aware of your own grief processes and attend to them. At the same time, attending to the grief needs of other family members can help make the holiday more bearable. Learning one another's grief walk is actually part of grieving. Being particularly aware of how a child is processing grief during celebratory holiday times is crucial to their sense of security and well-being. Another way to grieve together is to have some way of remembering the loved one in which each family member has an opportunity (not obligation) to contribute. It may be a special ornament placed on the Christmas tree, or it could be a favorite story told when gathered—something that acknowledges the loss but does not consume the entire holiday. Also, it would be wise to be prepared to give you and other family members space when needed. At any time, a song, a smell or a creak in the floor of one's childhood home can trigger a memory.

Being prepared for the stress that grief can trigger is the key to making the holiday season a time to welcome instead of dread. Become involved in acts of service individually or as a family to support others who are struggling financially. Let your involvement in seeing another family filled with joy serve as a springboard to your grief healing.

**“For when I am weak,
then I am strong.”**

2 Corinthians 12:10

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Family Therapy Center**



THANKSGIVING ON THE FRONT LINES

There are so many stories concerning the advent of the traditional Thanksgiving celebration in America. We hear that it began with the pilgrims who settled Plymouth Colony in 1621, following a severe winter during which many died. It was declared a national holiday on November 26, 1789, by order of President George Washington, but suspended and later revived by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863, when, during the Civil War, he proclaimed the day as a national day of “thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens.”

These historical stories seem to me a reminder of the blessings from the Lord God his nation has experienced, and, interestingly, these periods reflect a time during, or shortly after, some national crisis, typically warfare. These were periods in which individuals were reminded of the truth that God is the giver of all good gifts (James 1:7), and that in spite of difficult times, we realize how much greater our blessings are than our difficulties.

There are many, however, who do not pause to give thanks, even during this season of celebration. I wonder why? Is it because we find nothing to be thankful for? Surely Thanksgiving Day is more than

an empty token. Maybe our thoughts are all too often centered on self and what is happening in our lives. According to Robert Emmons of the University of California-Davis, “The self is a very poor place to find happiness or meaning in life.” Possibly we are not celebrating in thankfulness because life is good, and we expect things to continue as they are. Maybe we think that all that we have in life is the result of our personal efforts and abilities.

What if we didn’t have this great holiday? What if we were unable to be at home, in our comfort zones, enjoying all the blessings received in a nation so enriched by our Lord? It is here that we need to

pause, and if nothing else, be thankful for the sacrifices of those who have assured we can continue to celebrate what we enjoy in our lives today. Those who have paid the price for the freedoms that we enjoy so casually at times—our military veterans.

Serving the veterans on Lipscomb's campus as chaplain, I have had opportunity to talk with many of these men and women about Thanksgiving and their experiences of this special day while deployed away from home, family and friends. I share some of these thoughts to help the rest of us express gratitude for their sacrifice and our blessings.

One veteran reported, "I recall sitting in my small aid station with the other medics. A bunch of infantry guys joining us for our food, all wearing body armor, just getting off a late convoy. Stinking up the place after not having had water for a shower in months, talking about what happened during the attack on the convoy. Just another day. I thought briefly about my family, and wished I could have had my family's food and company. But really I was just trying to stay in the moment and enjoy something so simple, but so significant, as hot food. My focus lingered on staying alive. I honestly wasn't sure I would make it out of there, and I remember hoping my family was picturing me in a better situation during the holiday."

A former Marine sergeant reported his holidays experience as "a desolate gap where happiness is missing and emotions of emptiness begin to consume the warriors as they grow homesick." When drawn to the brink of loneliness he looked in his wallet and saw the picture of his family. He realized why he was deployed. He was there for his nation and his family, and this thought brings comfort as he sacrificed his time away from both family and nation.

As with the veterans above, many of our deployed veterans found themselves so engaged in their responsibilities that they forgot that special day or simply put it out of their mind. Certainly there were efforts on many military outposts where the company commanders tried to have special meals and devotions led by chaplains, but war knows no such special

days. Many of our veterans found themselves engaged in actual combat, patrols, fire fights, etc. One veteran reported that he lost six comrades on Thanksgiving Day; another lost two friends. During times such as these, it's often difficult to be thinking of loved ones, family and friends back home.

Whether on the island of Iwo Jima in the South Pacific, the cold, freezing mountaintop of Heartbreak Ridge in Korea, a rice paddy in Vietnam or in the deserts of Iraq or Afghanistan, Thanksgiving Day for many of our warriors is no romantic scene sitting around a table or comfortable tent thinking of home and what's going on there. In fact, this holiday was often put out of their minds because it could create loneliness and feelings of separation. The reality on this day for many was that they were trying to stay alive, focused on their mission and helping to protect their comrades.

Picture Thanksgiving Day on the front with our veterans—as with the pilgrims of old—coming through rough times, reflecting on the possibility that just maybe they, as soldiers, might in some small way be making it possible for their loved ones, family and friends to benefit, making possible the freedoms those back home enjoy. These things often cause the veteran to pause and to be thankful. And that is Thanksgiving on the front!

Obviously the most precious meaning of Thanksgiving is centered on God, the source of so many blessings. But surely it is not wrong to be grateful for the warriors in our nation who have also been a source of blessings as we enjoy the freedoms made possible through their sacrifices.

"O Thou who has given us so much, mercifully grant us one thing more—a grateful heart." —George Herbert

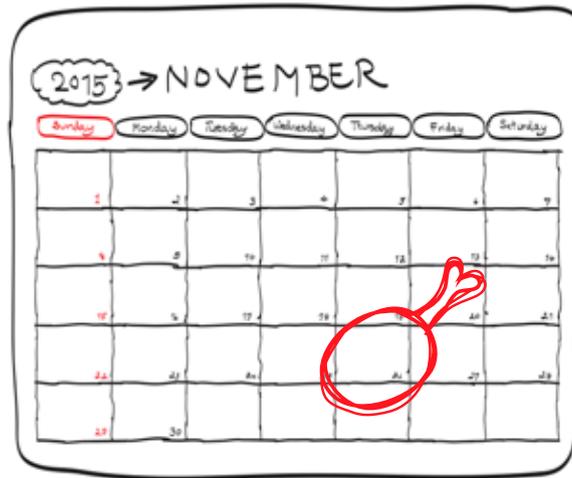


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Building Thanksgiving into the Church Calendar



I am a calendar guy. As I write this, a personalized monthly calendar with a family photo peers out from beyond my laptop. In the last hour, I've checked the calendar on my phone three times. This morning, at breakfast, my family of five huddled around the kitchen calendar as we excitedly flipped over to a new month. Each month brings vivid memories of the past along with hopeful anticipation of the future. Holidays, birthdays, vacations, milestones and traditions all find themselves in the calendar.

My congregation is a calendar church. For the past 20 years, my congregation has celebrated the church seasons. We recognize the familiar seasons of Christmas and Easter as well as unfamiliar ones, such as Epiphany and Lent. We don't observe the seasons out of biblical command, but rather, we recognize the seasons because they help us connect with the entire scope of biblical themes, emotions and readings. Just as the Hebrews followed seasons and feasts of Passover, Pentecost and Purim, Christians began observing seasons and feasts in addition to communion.

Now, this may seem odd or different to some, but most of us are more calendar-oriented in our church life than we realize. After all, while my former congregations did not observe the official church seasons, we observed and recognized the unofficial church seasons. Mother's Day, Memorial Day, Father's Day, Independence Day, Labor Day and Thanksgiving all received

attention ranging from red, white and blue bulletin covers to PowerPoint slides to themed sermons. So, most all of us recognize seasonal observances in church life.

Calendars help us organize our year. They help us develop and maintain life-affirming traditions. Calendars help us interpret the various ups and downs of life. Just as spring reminds me that God makes all things new, autumn reminds me of the temporal nature of this life. If life was one perpetual summer—or, dare I say, winter—our life experience would greatly differ. Calendars and seasons ensure we experience the full cycle of life, not just our favorite times. Calendars proactively organize our values and keep us from living reactively. For these reasons, congregations can enhance teaching and reflection through intentional use of calendars.

As an example, Thanksgiving currently looms on the horizon. Intentionally building Thanksgiving into the church calendar creates the capacity for deeper contemplations of thankfulness that will echo out beyond the month of November. Now many of us have experienced a song service dedicated to thankfulness, sermons on giving thanks or even Thanksgiving Eve prayer services. Honestly, I've been blessed by all these, but what might a more intentional, comprehensive engagement of Thanksgiving look like?

First, building Thanksgiving into the church calendar helps the congregation move beyond civic and patriotic expression of thankfulness. While we can be grateful for the country's emphasis

on being thankful, the church's trajectory of thankfulness must extend beyond the flag, pious founding fathers and stories of Pilgrims and Native Americans. Certainly, we can be thankful for our country of origin and government, but our thankfulness for the Kingdom of God should exceed any national or state provisions. Moreover, limiting our thanksgiving to national expressions ignores our sisters and brothers around the world. A thoughtful, proactive season of congregational thanksgiving keeps the church from hackneyed, glib modes of expression.

Second, building Thanksgiving into the church calendar keeps thankfulness centered on Jesus. As we move beyond turkey and cranberry sauce, we discover a foundation of thankfulness built on God as creator. In James 1:17, we read, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights." God first revealed himself in creating light. We must be thankful for light and every single additional gift that has followed. As we contemplate our humble position as the created, our thankfulness increases alongside our awareness of our undeserved abundance. In addition, a Jesus-centered posture of thankfulness moves past the receiving of gifts. In Acts 20:35, we discover, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Instead of Thanksgiving merely being a time of naming acquired gifts, we seek a posture of giving. Simply put, when Scripture sets the agenda for Thanksgiving, God takes us to a deeper spiritual awareness.

So what are some practical ways churches can build Thanksgiving into the church calendar?

- Have a special prayer thanking God for all new births, baptisms and new members over the past year.
- Go back through old bulletins, emails and prayer lists to discover answered prayers over the last year. Have a "where are they now" session.
- Give people a few weeks notice that there will be an opportunity to share thanksgiving stories. A congregation could have open mic time or share the thanksgiving stories via bulletin boards or projection screens.
- Consider taking an inventory of congregational happenings or offering a year in review to name God's blessings.
- Encourage those delivering communion table talks to focus on thankfulness throughout November.
- Preach or teach on thanksgiving themes such as God as creator, Jesus as redeemer, prayer, giving, stewardship,

poverty, hospitality and even how to process family traditions, memories and stress over the holidays.

Finally, let me share the two main ways my congregation builds Thanksgiving into the church calendar. First, like many Nashville area congregations, we're blessed to weekly house gentlemen through a local homeless ministry, Room in the Inn (read the article by Room in the Inn founder Charles Strobel on page 30). This ministry begins Nov. 1 of each year. Therefore, on the first Sunday of each November, we have a special prayer service for the guests who will sleep in our building November-March. Specifically, we call all the children up and we lay hands on the pillows our guests will use. We thank Jesus for coming to earth even though there was no room in the inn for him. We thank Jesus for giving us a home in the Kingdom. We thank Jesus for the blessed image bearers who will sleep and break bread with us in our basement.

Second, my congregation has long held a traditional Thanksgiving potluck the Sunday prior to the big day. Most members would say it's their favorite Sunday of the year. We look forward to it for months. Downstairs in the kitchen, people bring classics such as turkey and dressing as well as items that make us unique—plenty of kale as well as a shrimp platter. Normally, it's our largest attendance of the year. We invite friends, neighbors and recent guests who've slept in our building. After I fix my plate and sit down, I like to pause and look around. Young and old. Rich and poor. Urban, suburban and rural. Blue collar and white collar. How did this group find each other? What brings us together? What are we most thankful for? Jesus.

I'm overwhelmed with thankfulness and then, I realize something. I've had this feeling before. This reminds me of something. This feels like communion. And then it hits me—all thankfulness flows out of the Lord's Table. I'm thankful that Jesus eats with me. I'm thankful I get to eat his body, drink his blood and find life and nourishment in him. I'm thankful for my sisters and brothers, the present physical body of Christ, who sit around the table with me. Communion is the original thanksgiving meal.

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A SERMON ON GRATITUDE

Sharing good news for
Thanksgiving

“What we are doing is not right. This is a day of good news, and we are keeping it to ourselves.” (2 Kings 7:9)

For you, it all began with the eerie feeling something was terribly wrong. Before you could identify the cause, there was that haunting suspicion something was off—not quite right.

First was tingling in your hands and feet; then a feeling that your foot was asleep but you couldn't wake it up. One day while stoking the fire, a burning coal landed on your hand; it should have burned. You

felt nothing. What you long feared and tried to deny was certainly true. You had leprosy.

The “L” word of the scriptures was far more life altering than AIDS has proven to be today. You remember going to the rabbi to tell him first and asking for his prayers. Telling your wife was the hardest and most painful part. How many times have you relived that tragic scene? “We never even got to



hug goodbye,” you thought to yourself at least a hundred times. The kids were young and had no idea why you were leaving, but “kids are resilient,” everyone kept saying.

In the midst of an economic downturn, you left your wife and kids to the care of the villagers. Things were desperate for everyone—and more so for you. You were to leave and never return—send back financial assistance if you could. But how could you provide for them?

Someone told you a leper colony gathered in a ravine a few miles away. You went to find others with the scarlet “L” and see if they’d take you. With Israel now in a famine, it was possible you’d be an outcast even there. Sure enough, there was no room even there, and so you joined forces with three others to make it on your own.

The famine got so bad you heard there was a donkey’s head for sale in the meat market that fetched \$150—a bag of peanuts was nearly \$10. The village you left was under siege by a rival army. Your old hometown was now ravaged; last report had your family barely scraping by on the scraps of others. The vicious Aramean army was who had laid siege to the city you learned. It would soon be the death of you all.

One afternoon, the hunger pains began playing tricks with your mind—or had they? A simple cost benefit analysis ensued in your mind, and then you began to share your proposition with your leper buddies:

“If we keep doing what we’re doing—we die. If we sneak back into our city with the famine—we die. But if we go to the Arameans and surrender—they either have pity on us or we die. If they spare us; they feed us. If they kill us, then we die.”

And with that, the four decided to pay a visit to the Aramean camp.

Arriving on the outskirts of the large Aramean camp, the four men began yelling, “Lepers, please help four lepers!” But no response returned from the camp. Getting a little closer, they yelled again. Still no reply. Finally, one of them was so hungry he walked right into the Aramean camp—only to realize the camp was deserted.

The Lord had caused the Arameans to hear things—the sounds of chariots and rival armies. The Arameans had fled in fear, leaving a

campsite filled with fine foods and the world’s plunder. Now the four outcasts were living like kings on the plunder of conquered foe.

After eating and drinking so much your stomach could burst, you began hoarding the remains. Taking silver, gold, fine clothes and preserved foods, you began building stashes around the area like a squirrel before winter. Walking back and forth from the camp to your hideouts, you built an impressive haul that might last you for years...but then it hit you.

“What we are doing is not right. This is a day of good news, and we are keeping it to ourselves.” (2 Kings 7: 9)

So you went and told the gatekeeper of your village. He told the king. The king thought it a trap. Five horsemen proved him wrong. When the news reached the villagers, the mad dash to the Aramean camp left the gatekeeper trampled to death. The people feasted and celebrated the goodness of the Lord, and they recalled a stanza from a song written by King David, “*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; my cup overflows.*”

It was the best “Thanksgiving” ever—thanks to four lepers armed with good news.

Perhaps this is the year you look at all God’s bounty piled high on your table and resonate with the words of the outcasts among the Arameans, “What we are doing is not right...”

Thanksgiving is still a day of good news, so how can we spread the message?

Share your food and share some football. But above all, share your faith in a God who, through Jesus Christ, is still feeding outcasts and calling the desperate to a table of wine and bread where all can be filled.

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White Church of Christ



An attitude of

GRATITUDE

Intentionally pursuing thanksgiving every day

Earl Lavender

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For Christians, gratitude is not just a once-a-year holiday; it is a way of life. It is for this reason we meet at the table of our Lord weekly to revel in the greatest gift ever given—life in the Kingdom of God made possible through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Gratitude is not optional in the Christian walk; it must permeate everything we do and say.

I have taught the course Spiritual Formation for Ministry at Lipscomb University every semester since 1999. In this study, we consider the spiritual practices that sustain us as we minister to others. The most basic of all practices is what I call “the discipline of intentionality.” It is up to us to choose the world in which we live. If we are to live where God is sovereign and we are his beloved children, we must intentionally place ourselves there. We wake up every morning to a reality that we have largely chosen. We spend the currency of our lives in the story we believe provides the most meaning and purpose.

So, what thought gets you out of bed in the morning? Do you awake with anxiety about what lies ahead? Are you primarily concerned with paying the bills? Or, do you awake with a grateful heart, looking forward to the adventure of walking with God in his creation another day, living to his glory?

Jesus instructs us to live without worry. How is this possible with all the daily challenges we face? This is how: choose to live in gratitude for a God who feeds the birds and paints the marvelous landscapes of wildflowers in brilliant color, knowing he cares for you much more than any of these. The antidote to worry is gratitude—and gratitude is a choice.

Living with an attitude of gratitude is an indispensable discipline for a follower of Jesus. Paul said, “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Even in the most difficult circumstances of Paul’s life, he chose to be grateful. Remember when he and Silas were cast into prison in Philippi? What did they do? Sang praises to God! Gratitude was Paul’s natural response to all he faced in life! How did he do this? He trained himself in the ways of Jesus.

You can try (really hard) to be grateful in all things. Most likely, you will fail in “trying to be grateful.” If you live in a self-focused, self-directed and self-comforting world, you will be in constant need of more. It is hard to be grateful when all you can think of is what you do not yet have!

Yet this is the state-of-mind our culture encourages us to embrace. We are reduced to consumers with an insatiable desire for that newer and better thing. We are constantly under attack by this message of needing more—try as we might, a life of gratitude is simply not sustainable while breathing this air. The key to a life of gratitude is training oneself into the actions and teachings of Jesus. Gratitude is an intentional discipline developed through rigorous training.

Many have been blessed by Ann Voskamp’s *One Thousand Gifts: A Dare to Live Fully Right Where You Are*. She asks how it might be possible to live joyfully in the context of deadlines, debt, drama and even darkness. Her solution is to embrace everyday blessings and embark on the transformative discipline of journaling God’s gifts. She reminds us how we are already blessed with so much that we too often do not even see. Ellen Vaughn’s *Radical Gratitude: Discovering Joy through Everyday Thankfulness* is another very helpful consideration of the indispensable discipline of gratitude. With her great gift of storytelling she reminds us that gratitude is the lens which reveals God’s incredible grace at work. Without it, the world we see is distorted into a hopeless mess.

I have been teaching a Faith and Culture course for more than 20 years. The study involves evaluating one’s own understanding of the world as a Christian, and then asking how we might authentically live the Christian faith in one’s present culture. A large portion of the course involves apologetics—studying the evidences that point to the existence of a loving God as creator of the universe. For many years, I formed the students into groups that were required to make a final presentation explaining what they considered the strongest argument for believing in God. A number of those students were either non-believers or inactive believers. I marveled at the powerful and even elaborate arguments presented—many deeply convicting. Strangely, however, the non-believers—even while participating in these presentations—did not come to faith. They knew the arguments to support belief, but they remained unconvinced.

Seven years ago, I attended a seminar directed by Mark Scandrette, author of the book *Practicing the Way of Jesus: Life Together in the Kingdom of Love*. He encouraged attendees to divide people into Jesus “dojos”—a Japanese word that literally means, “place of the way.” It usually designates an area where one practices the martial arts. Scandrette suggested we need places to practice “the way” as taught by Jesus. It immediately struck me that this “life lab” experience of practicing the

ways of Jesus would be a better way of exploring the validity of the Christian faith.

If you think about it, the ultimate defense of the existence of God for the Christian is Jesus the Christ. He is the Messiah (“anointed one,” the Christ). He is “the Word of God” made flesh (John 1:1, 14). He is full of grace and truth (John 1:14). He is the exact representation of God (Hebrews 1:3). All the fullness of God dwells in him in bodily form (Colossians 2:9). Therefore, everything Jesus said and did must be true. Why not put that to the test?

So, the following spring, I divided my classes into life labs of six or seven students, and had them choose one of the many paradoxical teachings of Jesus. I then helped them construct a Jesus “dojo” which put a specific teaching of Jesus to the test over an entire semester. In the past several years, through these life lab experiences, many of my non-believing students have come to faith in Jesus as Lord and Christ. The course experience is no longer limited to an intellectual exercise; the students experience following Jesus in real time and are amazed by what they learn.

One of the labs most often selected is testing Jesus’ teaching that we should not worry, but rather live with an attitude of continual thanksgiving. While different groups have stated their purpose in various ways, the main idea is to practice gratitude intentionally. Rather than spending time in worry and anxiety, the groups have committed to practicing gratitude. The outcomes have been consistent and informative. A significant number of students remarked that this exercise changed their lives. I know of at least two students who decided to give their lives to Jesus—out of gratitude.

How does one train into a life of gratitude? Intentionally focus on what Jesus Christ has given you. Spend time meditating on Bible texts that focus on God’s amazing gifts to us. Keep a gratitude log. Form a group with others and experience your own gratitude “dojo” (contact me at earl.lavender@lipscomb.edu if you need help with this). Better yet, encourage your entire congregation to divide into life labs and practice gratitude as a church. It will change you in very positive ways.

Consider the admonition of Paul: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:15-17).

“I love you bigger!”

This is what my daughter used to say to me every night at bedtime. I would normally begin the contest with, “I love you big!,” to which she responded, “I love you bigger!,” followed by my, “No, I love you bigger.”

I’m sure you had your own version of the game that echoed through your hallway each evening, but at our house it was just one “I love you bigger!” after another. It usually ended when mom threatened to put me in time out if I kept Daisy (our then three-year-old) awake.

One night as I turned out the light, Daisy called me back to her bed. I knew a day would come when I couldn’t slip into her room and tuck her in, so one more visit wouldn’t hurt. “What do you want, Daisy? I already told you I love you bigger.”

Her response: “Daddy, I won’t ever say I love you little.” My daughter, whose only concept of big and little came from Grover, knew

that “little” should not be used in the same sentence with “love.” I’m not naive enough to think that the day will never come when she storms out of the house and slams the door, and even though the words aren’t spoken, in my head I’ll hear, “I love you **little!**”

But for now, I will rest in the promise of a three-year-old: “I won’t ever say I love you little.” I stopped outside her room to make a covenant with myself that I will make the same promise to her. I’m a big person who knows a lot about big and little, but will she be able to tell that my love for her is always bigger? Or will she hear, “Daisy, I don’t have time right now” or “Daisy, Daddy’s busy”—“I love you little.”

There may be a time for all of those statements, but I must make certain that when I say them, she hears, “You know, no matter what you do, I will always love you bigger.”

Well that’s a sweet thought, but how do we shout a “bigger” love to a world that has grown deaf to the passions of God. *Preaching* this “bigger” love and *living* it are two different things. If we want to get the world’s attention, then we must seek out little ways to love big.

I have served in youth ministry for the past 19 years.
While I have gotten fairly comfortable with the



challenge of teaching adolescents things found *in* the Bible, it has been a two-decade struggle at finding ways to help them live *from* the Bible. Among those things that teens struggle to learn and demonstrate during these turbulent years is the concept of “gratitude.”

It seems that we have gotten Thanksgiving turned around backwards. I have learned that the best way to model “thankfulness” to teens in our youth ministries (or in our own homes) is not to wait for the one day a year when turkey and pumpkin pie are on the table. You also won’t teach teens gratitude when you give them something and then hope they feel a sense of happiness, even though the result you hear is a grunt that sounds sort of like “thank you.” Rather we have to create environments where they can offer themselves as living sacrifices and witness gratitude in others, for it is then they understand what it means to give, and the natural result of giving is almost always thanks.

So how do we carry this out? Pick one of these ideas:

Visit the sick. Take a group of 10-12 teens to the local ICU waiting room. Pack a basket of wrapped store-bought. Take things like crackers, gum, mints, candy bars or bottled water. Call ahead and make sure that you are welcome, and then go to each person (or family) in the waiting room and offer them a treat and then offer to pray for the person they love who is in ICU.

You will be surprised at the response you will get from most families. Have teens lead most of the prayers. One group I worked with prayed for seven families and the next week when they returned, six of the patients’ conditions had improved! It was God’s way of responding to their little act to show a “bigger” love.

Sponsor a student. Find a group of inner city children to sponsor. Start small by finding a group of kids small enough for your teens to handle (a class at a school, a specific building in a housing community or those who attend an after-school program could work).

When August rolls around, contact the school they attend and get the school supply list. Gather the supplies and provide each of the children with all they will need to start school. I knew a group of teens who started with 50 kids one summer, and within five years, they were filling school supply needs for more than 600 children! God blesses little ideas to love people in “bigger” ways.

Sponsor a missionary. Have your group adopt a missionary sponsored by your congregation. Assign a different teen for each day of the month to email them a personal message, prayer of thanks or some inspirational thought each day. Most missionaries are far from home and Satan will

sneak into their hearts when our encouragement falls silent and will whisper to them, “They love you little.” We can allow the comfort that comes from God to grow bigger in their hearts.

Thank underappreciated volunteers. Identify the people who do the “little” things in your church—those who replace the attendance cards, sharpen the little pencils in the pews, fill the communion trays, Go to where they perform this task and paper the room with Post-It® notes of thanks, genuine messages of appreciation from each member of your group. You can bet they will hear you saying, “We won’t ever say we will love you little!”

Treat the shepherds. Find the room where your shepherds meet. Arrive early before their meeting. Leave a tray of homemade treats on the table. Leave a note in each chair. Let them know that the hours they spend interceding for us is recognized by us as a “bigger” love.

These are only five ideas, but they will keep your group busy for some time if you try them and will leave lots of people who often feel the world “loves them little” with an understanding of God’s “bigger” love. Most of these ideas won’t take more than an afternoon to plan, but will keep someone else strong in serving God for many weeks or months.

Perhaps as a child, my daughter can still hear the small whisper of the One in whose image she was made, that whisper that that says to a child: “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God.” Translation: “I love you bigger!”

If you are a teen reading these words, I pray that is the message you hear. If you are a youth worker, I hope you can still hear that whisper of God that he intends for us to pass on to teens. Too many have the idea that God prowls about “seeking whom he may devour” and saying, “If you do this, I will love you little!” or “If you don’t do this, I will love you little.”

That is not God. That is the voice of one who would have you believe that God is not capable of a “bigger” love for someone like you. But God cries out something very different. Each day he whispers to us, “I won’t ever say I love you little.” Before you get into an “I love you bigger!” contest with God, you should know that he will always win, because he can say to us: “But I loved you *first*.”

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THE Thanksgiving meal: *A Eucharistic meal*



Most tend to identify the Lord's Supper as primarily a memorial. There are some good reasons for that.

The Passover was a “memorial” or a “day of remembrance” (Exodus 12:14), and the Last Supper, where the Lord's Supper was instituted, was a Passover meal (Luke 22:14-20). Indeed, Jesus told his disciples to “remember” him by eating and drinking at this table.

We must, however, pay careful attention to what Jesus actually said. He did not say, “memorialize my death,” as if it were a funerary meal. He said, “do this in remembrance of me,” or “remember me.” The words of institution, which inaugurate the Lord's Supper meal, are not focused on Christ's death, but on Christ himself! We should remember Jesus—who he is, what he has done, and what he means for the salvation of the world.

Often “memorials” evoke sadness, including a funeral-like atmosphere of somber silence. Our culture constructs such memorials and observes memorial days, which embody sadness and solemn memory. As a result,

within our present culture, we often approach the Lord's Supper focused on sin, sadness and solemnity.

Memory is an important dimension of the Lord's Supper, and we remember, in part, the death of Jesus. However, Jesus' own table language, particularly his prayers, do not reflect this sadness.

Quite the contrary, Jesus expresses the essence of the meal when he “blesses” the bread and “gives thanks” for the cup (Mark 14:23; Matt. 26:27; Luke 22:17, 19; 1 Corinthians 11:24). Blessing and thanksgiving are essentially synonyms, or at least have significant overlap in their meaning. We “bless” the bread, not because we add something to it, but because it is a Hebraic expression for thanksgiving and praise. We praise God for the bread.

This is exactly what we do when we sit at the table of the Lord. We praise God for the bread and give thanks for the cup. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:16:

“The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?”

The “cup of blessing” echoes the language of Psalm 116. The psalmist asks, “What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?” The response: “I will lift up the cup of salvation” (Psalm 116:13), and this was part of a thanksgiving offering (Psalm 116:17), which included a thanksgiving meal. The “cup of salvation” is essentially the same thing as the “cup of blessing,” and it is part of the thanksgiving sacrificial meal, which Israel ate with joy in the presence of the Lord (e.g., Deut. 27:6-7).

Paul’s language, if we paraphrase, means something like, “The cup of salvation for which we give thanks participates in the benefits of the blood of Christ.” When we eat and drink, we enjoy “fellowship” (*koinonia*) with the redemptive work of God in Christ. Eating and drinking Christ, who is our “spiritual food and drink,” nourishes us (1 Cor. 10:3-4).

The Lord’s Supper, through participating in the body and blood of Christ, nourishes our new life in Christ. As new creatures in Christ, we are fed and animated by the life of the resurrected Christ. When we eat his body and drink his blood, we are nourished by a living Christ, not a dead one.

Consequently, this memorial is no funeral. Rather, it is a “thanksgiving memorial.” We remember, and our memory is filled with joy and thanksgiving because through eating and drinking we are nourished and animated by the life of new creation, which is the resurrected life of Jesus the Messiah who gave himself for us.

Memorial? Yes, of course.

But a “thanksgiving memorial,” a thanksgiving meal. Not a funeral.

And that is not all.

It is not only a memorial meal where we give thanks for what God has done in Christ, but also a meal where God does something through Christ in the power of the Spirit.

God nourishes us, communes with us and blesses us through eating the bread and drinking the cup. God is no passive spectator in this moment. God is active, and God shares with us the life and meaning of the body and blood of Jesus.

Indeed, the living Christ is not simply “on the table” (the representative elements of bread and cup by which God’s Spirit nourishes us). Christ is

also “at the table” as the living host who sits with us and eats with us in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus, as the resurrected King, is the fountain of new humanity, new creation. We are new creatures in Christ, and his resurrection is the foundation of new creation itself. We will become like him in our resurrection, and this is the hope of creation itself.

The Lord’s Supper is bread and cup, but more than bread and cup. It is not a “regular” meal. We may experience God through any meal, whether it is the nightly family meal, the church potluck or an annual Thanksgiving dinner. Old creation is still good and still mediates God’s joyful presence. But the Lord’s Supper is more.

The Lord’s Supper is the experience of new creation. Through the bread and cup of the old creation we experience new creation. It is still bread and juice—created materiality is not annihilated—but it also participates in the reality of the new creation through the presence of Christ. Whether we think of that presence in the bread, through the bread or at the table is inconsequential to this point. This thanksgiving meal is a new creation meal. Rather than annihilating creation, it transforms it, liberates it and brings it to its goal. In the supper, the living Christ nourishes us so that we are nourished by the life of the new creation.

The Lord’s Supper is a moment, by the promise of God, where God meets us in this old, frustrated creation so we might experience—taste, get a glimpse of—new creation. It is a moment of authentic participation in the new creation as well as anticipation of its coming fullness. Through the Lord’s Supper, God communes with us and confirms our hope. One day the frustrations of creation will pass away, and God will liberate and renew all creation.

Memorial? Yes, but a thanksgiving memorial.

Merely a memorial? By no means. God, through Christ, is present to nourish, animate and commune with us as we eat and drink at Christ’s table in the Kingdom of God.

For more about celebrating the Lord’s Supper as a joyous communion meal, read Hicks’ book Come to the Table: Revisioning the Lord’s Supper.

John Mark Hicks
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 Author of “Come to the Table”*



The Nations Give Thanks

Thanksgiving is an American holiday full of tradition and rich in culture. But what about those who were not born in the United States, but now live here. What does Thanksgiving mean to them? For the many immigrants and refugees who now live in the United States, the last Thursday of November means a new meal of foreign foods such as turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce and pumpkin pie. For these new immigrants or for those visiting from other countries, it can mean learning about pilgrims, turkeys and Native Americans. It is an opportunity for them to gain insights into a different culture and new traditions.

At the heart of this holiday, we give thanks. We thank God for the bountiful blessings that we have and celebrate together. These blessings come in all shapes and sizes. For the new immigrant or refugee in a new country, the smallest of blessings may have a huge impact on a family.

Years ago, I began working with new immigrants in our community. Our church, Antioch Church of Christ, reaches out to our new neighbors to welcome them by offering free English classes. We also prepare Thanksgiving boxes for them, and I work with an area food pantry and an English as a Second Language center that reaches out to the many nations now represented in Southeast Nashville. As Christians, we know we are to take care of orphans and widows, but we often forget that God also calls us to care for the foreigner, or the immigrant, in our country.



“The Lord your God is the God of all gods and Lord of all Lords, the great, mighty and awesome God who doesn’t play favorites and doesn’t take bribes. He enacts justice for orphans and widows, and he loves immigrants, giving them food and clothing. That means you must also love immigrants because you were immigrants in Egypt.” (Deuteronomy 10:17-19 CEB)

And in Leviticus 19:34, God tells us that, “The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself.” Over and again I have witnessed the needs of the immigrants and refugees in our community. I have also seen their thankfulness. One Thanksgiving I experienced what I thought would be a small blessing for an immigrant family that turned into an enormous blessing for me that I have never forgotten.

I pulled up in front of the small brick house just a few days before Thanksgiving. That day I had the privilege of delivering a food box to an immigrant family of eight, including six children. The box contained a bag of sugar, flour, canned yams, macaroni and cheese, a cake mix, a bag of candy and other canned and boxed foods. I also brought a turkey, a gallon of milk and a carton of eggs. As I exited my car, I was greeted with smiles and helping hands. The little hands helped me carry in the food box and put it on the kitchen table.

Everyone was jumping up and down with anticipation. I knew they would be excited when they saw the bag of candy and the cake mix. I smiled in expectation of their reaction. As 12 small eyes peered over the flap of the box, I heard the shouts of glee.

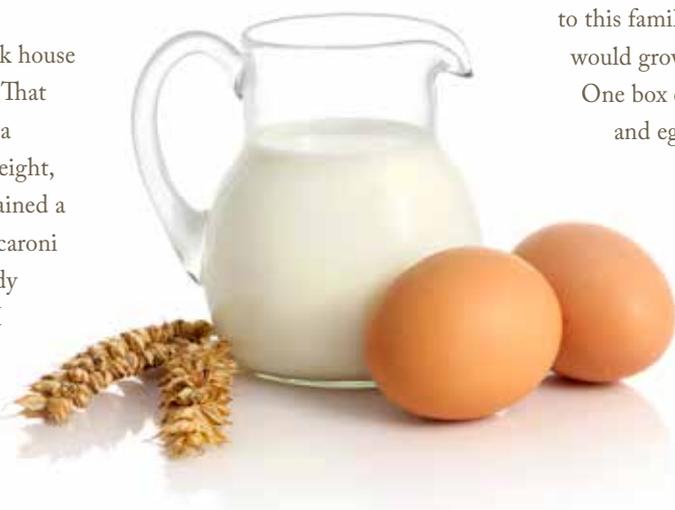
“Yea! Milk and eggs!”

Yes, milk and eggs. No shouts of “I get the bag of candy!” or “When can we bake a cake?” The shouts of joy were for two basics items: milk and eggs. I watched the mother open her fridge door to put up the milk and saw why everyone was so excited. It was empty. I couldn’t help but think how full both of my refrigerators were with food for our Thanksgiving feast. We quickly unpacked the box and put up the perishables.

As we put up the food, we talked. The mother told me she was trying to learn English, but it was difficult. Her husband worked long hours

and she was home with their children. Life in a new country was not easy, but they were happy to be here. I asked if they attended church anywhere and looking down, she said they did not. She did not know much about the Bible, church or God. But she was thankful they were in the United States. Then, the mother turned to me and asked me to pray with her. Although she was not a Christ follower, I could sense her hunger. She had a hunger not just for canned yams or turkey, but one that could only be filled by our Father. Standing in her kitchen and praying with this mother and her sweet children left me feeling full. We shared a moment of giving thanks to God for food, family and the future.

After an invitation to visit our church, I left the home. I could only feel amazed by the excitement one box of food brought to this family. One box that opened a friendship that would grow. One box that met a physical need first. One box of food that brought shouts of joy for milk and eggs.



“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you

hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’—Matthew 25:35-40

This Thanksgiving, I, too, am thankful for milk and eggs.

Lisa Steele
Assistant Dean of Intercultural Affairs
Lipscomb University



REFLECTIONS FROM the Ryman



Lee Camp is the host and creator of Tokens Show, a theological variety show. *Intersections* asked him to reflect upon lessons learned from hosting and producing the annual season-closing show performed each year on the Sunday prior to Thanksgiving at Nashville's historic Ryman Auditorium.

The year we began our annual tradition of doing a Thanksgiving Tokens Show at the famed Ryman Auditorium, one of the managers gave me a pre-show tour. I'm no entertainment professional—I still get giddy listening to a good musician who is good at his or her craft. So wandering around my first time backstage at the Ryman felt to me like being a kid again in the Woolworth's in my small hometown when I had enough money in my pocket to buy whatever I wanted at the candy stand. I could hardly contain the wonder of it.

As I recollect, the manager said to me, with all seriousness, something to this effect: "The room likes good music and people doing good work; it's like the spirits of all those who have played here through those many years, like they are paying attention, and they want you to do well, and they are cheering you on."

There does, indeed, seem to be such a spirit about the place: a deep gladness at the wonder of voices, the sweet strains of melodies and the vibration of strings on fiddles, guitars and cellos, the percussion from the thumping of the old stand-up bass and the striking of the strings on the Yamaha grand piano which sits on that hallowed stage.

I get to sit stage left over by the podium, from whence I do my hosting and storytelling, watching world-class musicians and some of

Nashville's finest vocalists spin their musical tales, and when the lights are low on stage, I will let my gaze wander out over the audience, following the graceful lines of that old wrap-around-balcony which hovers over the space, subtly illuminated. My heart will jump with gratitude as I watch the faces of friends and strangers enrapt in the experience. Though the gathering is a fundamentally different sort of experience than when old Tom Ryman built the Union Gospel Tabernacle for the preaching of Sam Jones, the effect is nonetheless the same: a spirit of gratitude which suffuses the place, reminding us that we humans are given the possibility of tasting the glory of transcendence, and that deep gladness of having been given the sweet gift of life, even with all its struggles and pains.

And the songs that I've heard spun on that stage are enough to nourish the soul for another season to work and labor and love: the song Vince Gill sang one night that he wrote about his brother, who lived on the streets for years, afflicted with addiction, who wanders into an old mission where he is welcomed to a table and a bed. Tears ran down my face, when I realized that this country music superstar had intuited something about the gifted nature of existence and the manner in which the sacraments are but token reminders of this giftedness:

*It's bread and water, man that's all you need
Bread and water, and a place to rest your feet
If you ain't too proud to get down on your knees*

The bread and water's free.

Or the night sweet little Lennon and Maisy, new young Music City phenomena, sang what has become the sort of "Nashville" show theme song:

*Sittin' here tonight,
By the fire light,
it reminds me I already have more than I
should.*

*I don't need fame, no one to know my name,
at the end of the day,*

Lord I pray, I have a life that's good.

It turns out, of course, that the psychologists and sociologists have discovered the importance of that old hymn we sing, to "count your many blessings." Unfortunately, some of them are also telling us that it is, counter-intuitively, the glut of choices offered by Western consumerist society that actually undercuts happiness and joy, which is to say that the more we insist on having it precisely our own way, the more unhappier we are becoming.

Our Thanksgiving show the autumn of 2013 was the start of a very hard season in my life, and I found myself grieved for a variety of reasons. Trying to lean in to the sort of stuff I tell my students they should do—"practice gratitude!"—I tried to take some of my own medicine, and found myself with a lyric and a melody that in time I got to sing that night on that beautiful old stage:

*Hungry in riches,
Bondage in greed,
Chains in our freedom,
Deep want in no need.
Oh give us hearts that are grateful,
Hearts that are free,
Hearts that are lovely,
Delighted in thee.*

*Stranger to neighbor,
Unknown to our friends,
Overwrought in much nothing,
Thus our hearts contend.*

*Oh give us hearts that are grateful,
Hearts that are free.
Hearts that are lovely,
Delighted in thee.*

May the God of all good gifts, whose mercies are new every morning, grant that we all might have hearts that are free and lovely and delighted in the One who has given us life.

Happy Thanksgiving.

*To hear "Hungry in Riches"
performed at the Ryman, visit
www.TokensShow.com/intersections.*

Lee C. Camp

*Professor of Theology and Ethics
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Showing Gratitude One \$ at a Time



A dollar won't buy much, that's true! But when 400 people put their dollars together, a difference can be made in the lives of people. That is the founding principle behind the \$ Club at Central Church of Christ in Athens, Alabama. The idea was not original to us, so we take no credit. One of our members brought the idea to our shepherds about four years ago and it was implemented shortly thereafter.

Like most good churches, we already had a line item in our budget for "benevolence," so the concept of helping others was not new. However, the \$ Club approach was novel, refreshing and most importantly, participatory. The idea was simple: take up a second collection every week and ask each member to give \$1. All of the funds collected each week go straight into the community to help families who need a little "hand-up." Each week after the sermon, a report is given to the church answering the question "What did my dollar accomplish this week?" During the report, paint cans are passed to collect the dollars to be used in the coming week.

Paint cans? Our leadership wanted to differentiate clearly that this is not a second offering for the church, so it is done separately from the weekly offering. Colorful paint cans are used as a reminder that this is different. The \$ Club has become one of the anchors for our local outreach program named Mission Athens, an intentional effort to share the love of Jesus with our community.

The primary goal of the ministry is to help people in our community, and it does. Every week utility bills are paid, partial rents are paid, temporary lodging is provided to families and help is given with transportation and medical bills. We receive multiple calls for assistance weekly, and our Mission Athens team works diligently to screen our clients and to help those who need it the most and who can sustain

in the future. A family may receive help only once a year. The ministry exists to offer a "hand-up" not "a hand-out." In 2014, 147 families in Athens/Limestone County, Alabama, were assisted by the \$ Club. Thirteen of those cases were families who were assisted with rent, deposit money and even furniture to move into permanent housing.

Years ago as a young minister, I read the book *Balance* by Ira North. In it he tells the story of a child who knocked on the door at the church and simply asked, "Are y'all the church that helps people?" I think that we have to be the church that helps people, or we have no reason to exist.

In addition to serving our community, the ministry has also had unexpected side benefits:

- Every week our members are reminded that we have people right here in our community who are homeless, who can't afford to have needed medical procedures done, children who don't have clothes or supplies for school and families with no food or diapers for their babies. It's much easier to contribute to help people than it is to give to satisfy a budget line item. This has led to increased generosity from many members who are going well above the \$1 requested each week. They often donate the furniture and clothing solicited during the weekly Mission Athens report.
- The ministry really resonates with our children. Every Sunday during the invitation song, I see youngsters getting their dollars out and preparing for the bucket to come by. They are attentive and invested. Their dollar is making a difference. As soon as the invitation song ends, several of our boys race to the rear of the auditorium, so they can have the privilege of passing the paint cans. After the money is collected, they retreat to the office and count the money. They are

learning generosity and service, and many of the older ones are often moved with compassion when they hear the plight of those who are their age.

- This ministry has led to new and improved relationships with other churches and community relief agencies. We have churches outside of our faith tradition contribute funds from their own \$ Clubs to further the Kingdom mission in our community. We often partner with community agencies and the benevolence programs of other churches to meet the needs of the less fortunate. It has not gone unnoticed.

One dollar at a time we show people the love of Jesus in tangible ways. The \$ Club creates opportunities to serve and to model Christianity in our community. Central Church of Christ has been doing this now for about four years, and it has been a blessing to our congregation and to our community. I don't know how many churches have actually implemented their own \$ Clubs, but I do know that many people who visit Central inquire about the ministry and seek information so that they can pass it on to their church leadership.

The \$ Club is a great reminder that individually, or even as congregations, we may not be able to do much, but when we pool our resources and work together, we can have a significant impact for the Kingdom right in our own backyards. Most of the people who read this article do not have to worry about where their next meal is coming from, or if they will be able to pay all of their bills paid next month. I can almost assure you that there are people in your community, maybe even right around your church building, who are struggling. One day we will stand before Jesus and give an account for our actions! According to Matthew 25, that judgment scenario will be based largely on answering the question "What did you do or not do for the least of these, my brothers?"

Bill Perkins
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Athens, Ala.



Free resources on Revelation from Lipscomb University's Office of Church Services.

The Summer Celebration Online Resource Kit, *Deployed—In an Uncivil War: The Apocalypse of John*, provides videos of the 10 keynote speakers as well as the eight speakers in the Young Preachers' Series exploring the seven churches of Asia. Study guides and additional discussion questions guide you through the compelling book of Revelation.

To get you started, we've included samples of the study guide and discussion questions to accompany the videos, but you can find all 18 videos and resource materials online, at:

summercelebration.lipscomb.edu

A DVD set of the Young Preachers' Series can be purchased for \$10 by visiting: <http://bit.ly/ypdvd>.

Speakers included in *Deployed—In an Uncivil War: The Apocalypse of John*:

Keynote Speakers	Young Preachers
Chris Seidman	Wilson McCoy
Chris Altroock	Phillip Brookman
Dean Barham	Jason Pagel
Paul Prill	Toby Levering
Randy Harris	Blake McCaskill
Kent Brantly	Jon Micah
Joshua Jackson	Richardson
Don McLaughlin	Jovan Barrington
Rick Atchley	JP Conway
Buddy Bell	

We are excited to offer this in-depth study on Revelation, and hope it can enhance your church's vision. For any questions regarding the two offerings, contact Scott Sager, VP of Church Services at Lipscomb University, at scott.sager@lipscomb.edu.



Traveling the highways to Zion

Thanksgiving for the pure and unsanctified

I was a young father at a time when parents routinely drove their children to grandparents' houses for the holidays. Sometimes neither set of grandparents would agree to a rotating schedule of Thanksgiving at one place and Christmas at the other. As a result, young families often drove to both places in November and again in December, meaning that far too much time was spent in a car. I'm sure the trips seemed endless to our kids. Sometimes Thanksgiving felt more like an endurance test than anything approximating a vacation.

Today, in our family, we—the grandparents—drive more often than our kids. And rarely to both houses for the same holiday. Our kids live too far apart. We travel as often as we can to Lubbock, Texas, and to Florence, Alabama, to love on our children and grandchildren. We drive farther than we used to and give thanks for the opportunity. To borrow from the book of James in the KJV, we “count it all joy” (James 1:2). It's worth every mile, every minute and every meal worn on my shirt (that steering wheel really gets in the way).

Worse drives. More thanksgiving. More joy. What's up with that? The answer's easy, so easy the question is often just ignored.

It makes sense why we had to drive back then. It was about who cooked; and who cooked was mom. No one else could do it. So you had to go to mom's, and we both had a mom, and our moms wanted everyone there, every time. Today, in our family, it's not about who cooks; it's about making it easy on grandchildren. Not wise to give them a good excuse to be cranky.

I like the new way better. I still don't particularly like long drives, but I like being the one who sacrifices, the one who endures confinement in a four-wheeled, grandparent-transporter bearing presents (there are always presents) that Marmie picked out but for which I also get hugs. Thanksgiving with kids and grandkids is not an endurance test; it's a delight! And grandparents doing the driving plays a part in creating that delight. A small price for a hefty reward.

Thanksgiving in ancient Israel required journeys for all but Jerusalem's residents. The miles traveled by the pilgrims who came the farthest were few when compared to today's journeys, but the time was longer because the modes of travel were so much slower. Even so, you can hear the joy of a psalmist who made that journey. Go some place where you can read loudly the words of Psalm 84:

*"How lovely is your dwelling place,
O Lord of hosts!
My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God.*

*"Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at your altars, O Lord of hosts,
my King and my God.
Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise.*

*"Happy are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.
As they go through the valley of Baca*

*they make it a place of springs;
the early rain also covers it with pools.
They go from strength to strength;
the God of gods will be seen in Zion.*

*"O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer;
give ear, O God of Jacob!
Behold our shield, O God;
look on the face of your anointed.*

*"For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my
God
than live in the tents of wickedness.*

*"For the Lord God is a sun and shield;
he bestows favor and honor.
No good thing does the Lord withhold
from those who walk uprightly.*

*O Lord of hosts,
happy is everyone who trusts in you." (NRSV)*

The book of Psalms has many lament psalms—psalms that complain. There are no psalms in which poets complain about the journey to Jerusalem to make an offering at the temple, but I suspect some pilgrims did complain. Even the most cursory reading of the Old Testament reveals the hearts of the people were only rarely truly committed to God. Without true commitment, that journey had to feel like an endurance test, not a festival.

The ideal was that all offerings brought to God at the temple should be accompanied with rejoicing; that ideal is made clear in Deuteronomy 12:10-12. Pilgrim psalms, like Psalm 84 above, display that ideal and reveal that some reached it, but many likely never did. Many probably just quit going.

2 Chronicles 30:5 reports the people "had not kept [the Passover] in great numbers as prescribed." Verse 26 of the same chapter reports that a properly observed Passover had not taken place "since the time of Solomon, son of King David, of Israel." That means Passover observance was in a state of decline for more than 240 years.

However, 2 Chronicles 30 not only reveals that long period of decline; it also describes a Passover after that period of decline during the reign of King Hezekiah. It was an incredible time of thanksgiving and rejoicing. In fact, the people enjoyed it so much that Passover was celebrated for an extra week.

Passover had declined; but Hezekiah, his officials and all the assembly in Jerusalem decided to keep it (30:2). They sent out couriers who invited all the Israelites they could find, even those living up in the defunct Northern Kingdom. The couriers called on the people to "return to the LORD." People came who were not properly sanctified. King Hezekiah prayed for them. Verse 20 reports that the LORD "healed the people," and in Verse 27 we read, "Then the priests and the Levites stood up and blessed the people, and their voice was heard; their prayer came to his holy dwelling in heaven."

Doesn't that sound great? Wouldn't we love thankful, joyful worship that resulted in people being healed and our prayer coming "to [the LORD's] holy dwelling in heaven"? Of course we would, so let's invite all the people God loves, the sanctified and those who are not. May people from near and far come together and worship and pray and give thanks!

Can we endure the inconvenience such powerful worship and thanksgiving would require? Can we accept the sacrifice? Can the strong, the mature (the grandparents) make the greatest sacrifices so the young, the weak, the immature (the children and grandchildren) are able to bring all their energy and joy to the gathering? I think we can. Once the dream is dreamed, we must. Because deep in our hearts we know the dream is not ours but God's. How can we ignore God's dream? Let's do this!

Rodney Plunket
Senior Minister
Church of Christ at
White Station
Memphis, Tenn.



Finding our own poverty

by Charles Strobel, Room in the Inn

The season of Thanksgiving brings to mind for me the simple words of my mother who always reminded us of the kindness of others. Widowed at age 38 with four children, ages 8, 7, 4 and 4 months, and the care of two elderly aunts, she never forgot how good people were to her, especially after our dad died.

Whenever we received something, either personally or as a family—a birthday gift, tickets to the circus, a Christmas fruit basket, a graduation card—her words were always the same.

“People don’t have to be nice to you. You need to thank them.”

It’s true. People don’t have to be nice to us. Kindness is not an entitlement. It was her way of saying, “Never presume or take for granted the kindness of others.”

Those early words of wisdom are now more present to me than ever as I’ve grown older. Without realizing the power of those words over the years, I believe they serve as that needle in a compass whenever I try to make some sense out of all the theological concepts that float around in my head. A heart of gratitude seems to be the mantra of the Christian notion of conversion. We sing of our amazing gift of being saved—of being lost and then found. As one old theologian said to me years ago, “Life is a gift and morality is gratitude.”

We receive the gift of life and our response to that life is a grateful heart. Everything we do—all our thoughts, words and deeds—are meant to be an outpouring of loving gratitude. The needle of our moral compass points to this spirit of gratitude, and we can evaluate our moral conscience around it.

How does this happen? How do we get to that place in our hearts where we experience the gift of God’s love in us, that gift that enables us to be kind?

For this to happen, I believe that we must start with our poverty.

The miracle of God’s love in us begins with our understanding of ourselves as poor. Contrary to a common perception, all of us are poor. In a world where the production and acquiring of wealth is held to be the highest human achievement, God’s love within us reveals a different truth—that from the beginning we are poor.

One of my favorite words is a beautiful Hebrew concept, little known and rarely used. You may forget the word, but I hope you remember its concept. The word is *anawim*. The *anawim* are the poor of the world as God sees us. They are not simply the ones without change in their pockets. More than an economic condition, the word refers to all of us, according to God.

Job reminds us that each of us is born naked. “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised,” Job 1:21. Jesus proclaims the first Beatitude: “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” Matthew 5:3. The actual biblical language is, “Blessed are the *anawim*.”

Anawim defines all of us—every man, woman and child—as a blessing. What is our blessing? Our blessing is that we know we are incapable of being happy all by ourselves. This is our poverty, and all the riches in the world cannot rid us of it.

If we need to, we can prove it to ourselves. For, if we are completely honest, as soon as we become aware of what it means to embrace the gift of a new day, not as our entitlement, don’t we have to come to grips with the question of poverty—not as something to avoid, but as something essential to living a life of love? Spiritual writings over the centuries say that there is no possible conversion unless one experiences a poverty of self. This is at the heart of the meaning of *anawim*.

But who wants to think of himself/herself as poor? Or to see ourselves as blessed in our poverty? Yet that is how we are created. Remember? Long before we achieve power, prestige, possessions, some would say even pigmentation, we are naked, vulnerable and poor, dependent on a woman for our survival.

When we forget this basic truth about ourselves, we end up fighting for our own survival rather than helping each other survive.

As we gather possessions, power and prestige, we begin to separate from one another, and that separation creates all kinds of differences of class and status. Although almost everyone believes in the necessity of possessions, the differences they create inspire extreme competition, rivalry and war. From the cultural existence of nations, states, tribes, clans, castes and social classes to the more informal groupings in congregations, clubs, associations, businesses and teams, our separation can diminish our realization of this divine truth proclaimed from the beginning: We share a common humanity. We share a common poverty.

But understanding ourselves as *anawim* establishes an equality among us that can lead to the greatest blessing imaginable—human kindness. Rather than allowing our riches to divide us, we can discipline ourselves to recognize how each of us is the same. We can be united through a generosity of spirit.

We understand this notion of *anawim* whenever we prefer service to others over personal advantage. When we do so, then and only then will the economic poor have hope and deliverance because of our generosity.

To be clear, we are not talking about people who stand above stooping down to help those who are below. We are expressing a gratitude that is a celebration of the communion of human lives, equally valuable before God, in which those with excess share with those who have less. Sharing our gifts is the greatest way to create a rich and beloved community. And attending to the poor in our own community is the first step in bringing the war against poor people all over the world to a halt. So this is where we start, right where we are—if nowhere else but in our daily conversation.

Is this kind of generosity, of human kindness, something that calls to you from deep within? If so, you will not need to rack your brain for ways to deprive yourselves and be generous. Simply by loving others with the miracle of God’s love, you will soon become poor. You will no longer have anything much of your own. Oh, you will have some possessions, but your time, your attention, your investment of energy will belong to the demands of those you love. And those you love will become an increasingly wider circle of people and places. Drawn ever more deeply into such generous love, you will understand better all those haunting words in the scriptures like, “Don’t worry about what you are to eat or what you are to wear,” “Take neither walking stick nor traveling bag,” “Do not return evil for evil,” and “Proclaim good news to the poor.”

And remember, you will not be alone if you do this. Millions of people of all races and cultures and creeds have already lived this way. For they have come to know that only God could want such love...that only God could love this way...and that only God’s love could make people do things that no human could.

A native Nashvillian, Charles Strobel started Room in the Inn, a citywide ministry helping the homeless of Nashville, in 1986. Today, the Room in the Inn is a combined effort of more than 180 Nashville-area congregations, creating small shelters using the space and volunteers they already have to offer hospitality and hope to guests who would otherwise find themselves on the streets. Room in the Inn provides shelter for almost 1,400 individuals each year. To find out more about Room in the Inn log on to www.roomintheinn.org.

Charles Strobel
Founding Director,
Room in the Inn



The Final Word

“I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.”
(Eph. 1: 18-19)

At the center of the universe stands the Church. Centered in the Church you'll find a Thanksgiving table. On that table you won't find a buffet of delicacies, only bread and a cup. It is a simple meal. The first meal of the week both in chronos and kairos time. And that meal inspires every other moment of thanksgiving coming along behind it.

God's Thanksgiving table draws us inward as the “eyes of our hearts are enlightened” to all the marvelous blessings we already have in Jesus Christ. As God's kingdom people, we see “giving thanks” modeled by grandparents and children alike through a contagious “attitude of gratitude.” But the Thanksgiving meal sits heavy on our stomachs if it is only an “inward” reality—being thankful moves us outward as well.

When we see Thanksgiving as a gift to be shared, it forces us outside the comforting walls of church and family and into a world of desperate need. The bread and the cup of the Church's Thanksgiving table compels us to share our food with those most hungry. In one case, the bread and the cup inspires a gift of “milk and eggs,” in another, the “bread and water” of which Vince Gill sings. As we turn outward with our gifts to share, we also discover others with a gift to share in return. It might be



a soldier, a student, a missionary or a child—when we cast our bread upon God's waters, it comes back to us in special ways.

Once we have turned inward and outward, we are reminded to let the Psalms usher us upward into a world where God loves “bigger.” First, God does something for us. Then God does something through us. Finally, God does something to us... like the grinch in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, God grows our heart of thanksgiving bigger than we ever imagined.

Praising his holy name, and sharing the good news of Jesus with others desperate to experience the joy we share becomes the end result.

Here's wishing you the joy of Thanksgiving each and every day!


Scott Sager

Vice President for Church Services

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*because leaders with vision
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- A Jesus Response to Challenges of Homosexuality
- Best Practices for Hiring and Firing
- Governance and Liability
- Vision Planning
- Managing Difficult Transitions and Conflicts in the Church
- Rethinking Ministry to Youth and Families
- Rethinking Ministry to Senior Adults
- Rethinking Short Term Missions
- Developing a Prayer Ministry for the Church
- Environmental Stewardship
- Going Deeper into Revelation

...or, tell us your needs and we will be happy to develop specific material for the issues your church is facing

If you would like to host one of our Engage Leadership Summits at your church or school, or would like to talk about creating a specific leadership summit to address your own needs, contact scott.sager@lipscomb.edu. We might be just the guide you're looking for.



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