

“Thanksgiving Begins in Spirit”

Thanksgiving Sunday Service
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Nov. 21, 2021

Scripture Readings

Psalm 100
James 1:2-4,16-18

Hymns/Songs

“We Gather Together” 807
“Come Ye Thankful People Come” 801
“Now Thank We All Our God” 788

Psalm 100

A Psalm for Giving Thanks

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth!

² Serve the LORD with gladness!

Come into His presence with singing!

³ Know that the LORD, He is God!

It is He who made us, and we are His;
we are His people, and the sheep of His pasture.

⁴ Enter His gates with thanksgiving,
and His courts with praise!

Give thanks to Him; bless His name!

⁵ For the LORD is good;

His steadfast love endures forever,
and His faithfulness to all generations.

James 1:2-4,16-18

Testing of Your Faith

² Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

¹⁶ Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. ¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸ Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

Insight for Worship

Revelation Explained 911:15

"By the harvest are symbolized all those things that spiritually nourish a person."

Secrets of Heaven 9294

"The feast of the harvest...symbolizes the worship of the Lord and thanksgiving."

SERMON: "Thanksgiving Begins In Spirit"

This coming Thursday is a special day on our American calendar: Thanksgiving! Most people think that its roots go back as far as 1621, when the Plymouth colonists and the Wampanoag Native Americans celebrated their first mutually organized feast of thanksgiving together on our American soil. But one might ask, "Why did our early European settlers feel compelled to even have a harvest time feast of thanksgiving? Where did they get that notion in the first place?" The truth is, the theme of thanksgiving runs prominently throughout God's Holy Word.

Interestingly, it wasn't until over 200 years later after the first Pilgrims ate their meal with their Indian friends that our great American President, Abraham Lincoln, decided to make Thanksgiving a national holiday in 1863, to be observed on the fourth Thursday of November. But, do any of you know at what point during his presidency that "Honest Abe" decided to officially make Thanksgiving a national holiday? He did it right in the middle of what was one of the worst and most injurious wars our country has ever fought, yes, the Civil War!

But I ask you, why would Abraham Lincoln decide to instill a feast of *Thanksgiving* during one of our country's most wounding and terrible conflicts we've ever fought? History.com gives us part of the answer, which reads:

In 1863, at the height of the Civil War, in a proclamation entreating all Americans to ask God to "commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife" and to "heal the wounds of the nation." He scheduled Thanksgiving for the final Thursday in November, and it was celebrated on that day every year until 1939, when Franklin D. Roosevelt moved the holiday up a week in an attempt to spur retail sales during the Great Depression. Roosevelt's plan, known derisively as "Franksgiving," was

met with passionate opposition, and in 1941 the president reluctantly signed a bill making Thanksgiving the fourth Thursday in November.

So, part of Lincoln's intention behind proclaiming our national Thanksgiving holiday was to help the hundreds of thousands of mourners, as well as the thousands of physically wounded soldiers, to reach out to God in a spirit of love and gratitude for the many, many good things in their lives that the Lord had bestowed upon them, while also giving them a loving setting for Americans to pray together to "heal the wounds of the nation."

As I know you're all very much aware, Abe Lincoln was not your average depth of human being. He was immensely deep in spirit, and incredibly strong and insightful as a national leader, who had the faith, the wisdom and the bravery to strive hard to bring down and eliminate one of humanity's worst evils: slavery! It cost him his physical life, but he will forever go down in history as perhaps the greatest and best President our struggling nation has ever known. It takes enormous spiritual substance and maturity to have the kind of powerful insight that Lincoln possessed. I say that because in my observations of people of all walks of life, as well as in my own self-observation throughout my own 54 years of living, it is clear to me that in the face of years of hardship, pain and suffering **it can be extremely tempting to give up on our own spirit of thanksgiving—of passionately FEELING grateful to the Lord for His many ways of guiding and nourishing us in body and in spirit throughout life.**

The truth is, I believe, that when we human beings have been hurt and sometimes emotionally and spiritually crucified in life (which for some happens very early in life), it becomes very, very easy to let go of feeling thankful to God for life, favoring instead a spirit of doubt, anger, hopelessness and pessimism. Why, just this past week I was having a conversation with a young mother of three children, whose father had hurt them badly (emotionally and spiritually for many years), and this mother opened up bravely with me and said, "You know Kit, our Thanksgiving holiday is one of the hardest for my children and me to truly celebrate. My family finds it hard to feel really thankful inside. We've tried and tried over the years to reignite that spirit of gratitude, but it always seems to deflate inside of us. I don't know what to do to try to help my family to really get into the spirit of thanksgiving, given what we all have endured."

When this mother of three kids shared this with me, it hit me squarely, right in the middle of my guts, and I then felt, well...*grateful inside*...because unknowingly this person helped me with my sermon for today. I don't know really who she was, as one

of many people I happened to talk with this past Wednesday night during our city's very first celebration of Isamu Noguchi, the world renowned Japanese-American sculptor who lived for three years in the home of the Rev. Dr. Charles Mack and his family here in LaPorte. So, from a purely psychological and therapeutic standpoint, if and when we human beings are massively struggling with feeling thankful and happy in life because of the many blessings the Lord brings our way, one very wise response to that growing, overarching feeling inside of pessimism, anger and negativity is to enter into some form of in-depth psychotherapy—to allow the one suffering to seek out and find conscious expression and integration of their unhealed emotional wounds from long ago. For when we choose, instead, to use our mental-emotional strength to keep a lid on our powerful, repressed hurts—trying with all of our might to keep them “buried alive” inside of our psyche—we then accidentally make it much harder to remain freely open and connected with the Lord, who made us.

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Now, with all of that psychological truth being what it is, God makes sure that we all remain essentially free inside to love and worship our Lord, and to choose a pathway in life of love and goodness rooted in faith. In short, my friends, our spirituality involves our choice each day, even though we may have suffered immensely for many years: the choice to open up toward God and love our Savior and Redeemer, and to treat others with kindness, mercy and understanding, as we struggle our way toward the Lord's spiritual Promised Land. Yes, even when life deals us a very painful, long-lasting exposure to a lot of pain and suffering, God always makes sure to preserve the greatest and deepest degrees of our humanity deep inside: **our freedom to love God most of all, and our neighbor as ourselves.** This is what Abraham Lincoln was connecting with, I believe, when he chose to proclaim our national holiday of Thanksgiving during the height of our Civil War, when our human carnage was so terrible. He knew that even during the horrors of slavery and in the midst of warfare, we humans have the ability to reach out to God within love and faithfulness.

Lincoln's admiration and respect for his African-American brothers and sisters was deep, for he understood their amazing ability to celebrate what is good and true in the middle of immense stress and suffering, endured during enslavement for many years. What we know is that throughout his very busy presidency in the White House, he always took special care to greet his many black visitors, who admired him very much. In the online site “SmithsonianMag.com” we read this about how warm-hearted Lincoln was toward his African American visitors:

As the white Union nurse Mary Livermore observed, “To the lowly, to the humble, to the timid colored man or woman, he bent in special kindness.” Writing in 1866, a Washington journalist similarly noted that the “good and just heart of Abraham Lincoln prompted him to receive representatives of every class then fighting for the Union, nor was he above shaking black hands, for hands of that color then carried the stars and stripes, or used musket or sabre in its defense.”

Lincoln appears to have always shaken hands with his black guests. And, in almost every instance, he seems to have initiated the physical contact, despite the fact that shaking hands, for Lincoln, could be an understandably tiresome chore. “[H]e does it with a hearty will, in which his entire body joins in....”

In conclusion, the Apostle James reminds us that most people are going to go through great adversity, trials and tribulations. But, when such is our lot in life, we do not have to give in to the whispers of devils and demons to respond to our suffering, our many hurts and traumas in life by harboring anger, pessimism and vengeance. Instead we can cultivate a very heartfelt, real and humble faith in the Lord our Good Shepherd, who always enables us to use our sufferings and tear-soaked days as grist for the mill of our souls. As James said it so well: “[Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.](#)” (James 1:2-4)

And so this Thursday afternoon or evening, when you have the blessing of offering up a Thanksgiving prayer, may we each remember what that feast symbolizes and represents. As Swedenborg wrote so well: “The feast of the harvest...symbolizes the worship of the Lord and thanksgiving.” (SofH 9294) The Lord's gifts are not only those of the natural world; He provides us with what we need to nourish and sustain our spirits as well as our bodies. The Lord's love and wisdom are the spiritual food that will sustain us to eternity. And one of the important ways we can open ourselves up to receive the Lord's gifts is by freely acknowledging that they are, indeed, from Him, and not of our own doing. In this frame of mind, the Lord can flow into us and implant those seeds of truth and good, leading to a heavenly harvest, both in this world and in the life to come. Truly my friends, the living substance of Thanksgiving begins and ends in spirit! Amen.