

"I Give Thanks"
A Sermon Preached at
Grace-Trinity Community Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota
November 18, 2007 – Thanksgiving Sunday
By the Rev. Scott O. Stapleton

Thanksgiving is an impossible holiday. The ideal it represents, best symbolized by Norman Rockwell's 1943 Saturday Evening Post cover depicting three generations of a New England family happily sitting down together at the feast table, that ideal may be realized somewhere in our native land this coming Thursday, but I'll lay you odds most families' holidays are a lot more trying. Perhaps not as trying as the gathering depicted in Susan Kinsolving's poem, "Fill the Cavity with Crumbs," but trying even so. I'd like to read her poem now. It's about a family coming together for the holiday. It is a bit extreme, but it will definitely give you a sense of what we're up against.

"Fill the Cavity with Crumbs"
by Susan Kinsolving

We were divorcing, but after giving Thanksgiving. It was all relative with relatives. Everyone came wanting: to grate, mash, carve, or strain. It was a strain. Who knew a frozen

turkey took three days to thaw? We hauled boiling water to the bathtub. Fowl was' the noun, but quickly became adjectival. My almost-ex overcooked cranberries until

they exploded across his shirt like a machine gun, proving him, the victim. The garbage disposal jammed and overflowed as our cousin waltzed in with her special dish, lurid whipped yams, dotted

with mini-marshmallows in a heart shape around a big smile face. I eyed the mace. Uncle Ed said an ecumenical grace. Drunk, Aunt Dede described her sister's "firm grasp of the superficial," then

added, "Make this insult official." My mother replied, "I won't cry. Because someday I'm going to die." After a long pause, eight people said they'd have to skip the pie and say an early

goodbye. Dad called it “mincing the mince.”
Quit undone, he laughed alone at his pun.
For me, the day seemed endlessly long. But I
was thankful nothing had really gone wrong.

Not much of a holiday, if you ask me. Funny for its mayhem, but the conclusion—“I was thankful nothing had really gone wrong”—isn’t there more that we could be thankful for than “It could have been worse”?

I’d like to think so. In fact, I think it will be so if we make the exercise of giving thanks deliberate. That is, what if we did take time out to count our blessings, to actually name them one by one. And what if we did so in such a way that our gratitude acknowledged our dependence upon these gifts, and not our independence from them. We often think.../ often think!...that the blessings that come our way are in some sense rightfully ours, that we deserve them—because we are generous ourselves, or hard-working, or because we’re really nice, decent people. So we should be blessed! But what if we didn’t deserve them? What if the things we should be thankful for are ours in spite of ourselves, indeed, inexplicably ours if we were really to tally up our debts and credits and hand out blessings on that basis? I do not doubt that there are individuals here in this very room who deserve every blessing they get. And I do not doubt that there are moments in each of our lives when our lights so shine that everyone of us ‘deserves’ a divine bonus. But I also do not doubt that the many blessings we receive, the veritable shower of blessings we experience daily, they are disproportionately more numerous than however many random acts of kindness we would like to give ourselves credit for. And if so, then what would a blessing count be like that acknowledged our indebtedness at the same time it gave thanks for what was ours but not ours?

I would like to offer one such blessing count right now. And I begin with giving thanks for my wife, Elaine, because I am a difficult fellow to live with. I admit it. She has given me three wonderful children, innumerable loaves of home-made bread and other fine dishes, a hand-knit sweater or two—a risky business; I am very finicky about my clothing—and the pleasures of her company. But it is her willingness to live with my quirks, my moodiness, my brilliant but perfectly dreadful ideas, and my ingratitude that I want to give thanks for now. Marriage is a real test of character. You are known in ways you may not want to be known for. And yet, for those who pass the test, those who bless you with the gift of their love, you are loved as well. For that I wish to give thanks.

I give thanks for knitters, and weavers, and the whole realm of things wool and flax and angora. I extend this realm to crafts-men and women in general—in truth, to artists of all kinds, the watercolorists and the organists

and the soloists and the choirs and the Cynthia Dobrinski's and the Charles Hubert Hastings Parry's who write the music that we ring and sing. I give thanks for typographers and calligraphers and sculptors and architects, for poets and novelists and short story writers, and essayists and wordsmiths of all kinds. God, how I wish I were as creative as they! I can write, and I can draw and paint too. But, regarding the latter, I could never draw and paint because that is what I had to do, I couldn't not do it. And regarding the writing part, the words do come to me, but I have no idea where they come from! I am glad that this late in my life I finally have a 'voice'—that peculiar manner, that is, that a writer has of saying whatever he or she wants to say—as opposed to the laborious business of constructing a style based on what other writers do. But having reached this stage in my life, I have to say I feel more adrift than anchored. I truly do not know where the words come from—from God, I hope, and by Sunday morning, 10 a.m., please. But once again, I am indebted for a gift not of my own making, indeed one that comes despite my mak-ing. For that, I give thanks.

I give thanks for the sheer wonder of it all, for what Gerard Manley Hop-kins called “dappled things.” Lewis Carroll in his poem “The Walrus and the Carpenter” said

“The time has come,” the Walrus said,
“To talk of many things:
Of shoes—and ships—and sealing-wax—
Of cabbages—and kings—
And why the sea is boiling hot—
And whether pigs have wings.”

But in Gerard Manley Hopkins' hands such things are marked with small spots, and he gives thanks for them and for

...skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon the trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced - fold, fallow and plough;
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.
All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

Praise God, Hopkins says, and he's right. The sheer wonder of it all is nothing I could have ever imagined, let alone created. And I give thanks for it.

I give thanks for women. I know this isn't exactly the sort of thing a male preacher is supposed to announce from the pulpit, but I mean it. Women are not men. How's that for a profound truth? I have learned to

give thanks for men, and they continue to amaze me by their accomplishments, but I have always loved the difference that women are. Vive la difference! And so, by extension, I give thanks for all kinds of other differences as well: for gays, because I am straight; for blacks and browns, because I am white; for children, because although I was one once, I occasionally lose sight of the gifts they bring, and it's awfully nice having them around to remind me of what I've lost. I give thanks for Jews, because I am a Christian; for Catholics, because I am a Protestant; for Presbyterians, because I am a Baptist. Indeed, I have learned how to be a better Christian Protestant Baptist precisely by learning what it means to be a Jewish Catholic Presbyterian—if there is such a thing.

I tell you one thing: I give thanks for the *Book of Order!* Yes, at the last presbytery meeting, the worship service borrowed heavily from the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s *Book of Order!* And what impressed me the most was when we all recited G-1.0200, "The Great Ends of the Church." They are:

- The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;
- The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;
- The maintenance of divine worship;
- The preservation of the truth;
- The promotion of social righteousness;
- And the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

How's that for clarity and cutting to the heart of things? You want to know what churches are about? Read G-1.0200! You won't find that in a Baptist book of order. There's no such book! *There's no such order!*

Now, to give credit where credit is due, it's the Baptists' lack of order that made it possible for me to be an ordained minister. I said earlier that I was quirky and moody. Well, that quirkiness and moodiness hasn't always been...appreciated, shall we say. Some find it attractive. Most want to keep it at arms' length. And a few actively oppose it. They tend to lead orderly lives. Baptists, by contrast, welcome quirks. (Lord knows we've got enough of them!) And as they tolerate moodiness as well, they welcomed me as one of their own. I give thanks for them, even though their lack of order can drive me up the wall! But they gave me a home in which I could serve God and humans alike. Thank you, O you disorderly Baptists.

I'm just getting warmed up, but it's time to quit. I haven't said a word about books, or scholars, or my in-laws, or my own family—have I mentioned my twin brother?—or my friends, or all of you, my church. I have not mentioned the gift of tomorrow and the hope of forgiveness it brings, or today with all of its many possibilities, or the yesterdays now gone but filled with hidden treasures. It is time to quit. I do hope that even this much has whetted your appetite for doing likewise, for coming to your

Thanksgiving tables with a renewed sense of wonder for the many, many blessings you receive and do not deserve. It is a humbling and heart-warming exercise, this business of thanks-giving.

I'll close with a table grace I wrote. I didn't have Thanksgiving in mind when I wrote it, but it seems appropriate now:

Good food and drink is what I think.

God's love, I'm frank, is what I thank.

Amen.