

Feast or Fast

It was less than a year after the Pilgrims settled at Plymouth. That first dreadful winter had killed nearly half their numbers. Disease, mostly pneumonia, had taken an awful toll. And yet, as the second winter approached, the colony had managed to survive. With a good harvest and the help of the native people came the hope for a better life. Still, the Pilgrims faced an unknown future. How to respond?

As deeply religious people who had fled persecution in England, the Pilgrims knew that some sort of religious act was appropriate – but what kind? Some Pilgrims wanted to fast – to have a time of repentance for the sufferings they had undergone at the hands of an angry God. Other Pilgrims wanted to feast – to have a time of thanksgiving for God’s blessings in helping them survive in the wilderness. So a debate ensued: to feast or fast?

We know which side won. Governor William Bradford decreed a three-day feast in 1621 – the first American Thanksgiving. In the face of adversity, the Pilgrims chose to feast rather than fast. In the midst of afflictions, they chose to thank God for their blessings

rather than to focus on their hardships.

To feast or fast – the pilgrims chose feast.

Feast or fast – that also is our choice as we examine our own life. As a pastor I am keenly aware some of us may not feel very thankful this holiday season. We have gone through heartbreak and loss. We have struggled with sickness and suffering. We have dealt with loneliness and grief. We have known disappointment and perhaps even experienced depression over so many things that can rob the joy out of life.

So is life feast or fast? I suppose it depends on our perspective. Does our Thanksgiving really depend on how well life treats us? Is Thanksgiving reserved only for the good times but shoved aside during the bad times? Does it go up and down like a roller coaster – or how well the stock market is doing?

I'm driving at what is at the heart of authentic Christian living. God doesn't need our thanks, but we need to give it. Yes, we need to give thanks because, like the Pilgrims, our circumstances confront us with a choice: to feel miserable for our burdens or to be thankful for our blessings. How do we respond to life – as blessing

or burden? As feast or fast?

If we look to the Pilgrims as our guide, the way to surmount the tough times is to see life as abounding in blessing. You and I – each and every one of us – are so richly blessed beyond our deserving. When we know this, when we really know it from the depths of our being, we can't help but give thanks.

I'm referring to a deeper form of thanksgiving than merely thanking God for material prosperity or intellectual ability or physical beauty or good health or even living in this beautiful part of Arizona. I'm referring to something even deeper than the gift of family and friends, or the fact of having a meaningful job or a comfortable retirement.

The thanksgiving I'm referring to is what the Pilgrims knew so well. It's the thanksgiving of finding yourself forgiven when you have confessed a sin. It's the thanksgiving of taking a leap of faith and finding God's arms waiting to catch you. It's the thanksgiving of finding peace in the middle of turmoil, confirmation in the midst of confusion, and life in the very act of dying. It is the thanksgiving we find in our gospel today.

Ten lepers suffer from a notorious skin disease that makes them outcasts in their own community. For all practical purposes they are the walking dead as far as everyone else is concerned. All they have left are their voices to cry out to Jesus for mercy. And Jesus responds. He heals all ten. The ones who were as good as dead are alive again. Jesus gives them back their lives. And yet, only one returns to give thanks.

This is thanksgiving in the deepest and most profound sense: having the quiet confidence that nothing can separate you from the love of God. Know that God loves you, really loves you, and the anxieties and uncertainties of this world lose their power to destroy you.

I have seen this type of thanksgiving time and time again in my ministry. In a parish that I served there was a dear man by the name of Jerry – 91 years young. He had the most wonderful attitude about life. His body was failing, his eyesight was growing dimmer, his aches and pains were intensifying, and his visits to doctors more frequent. Yet, never once did I hear Jerry complain, not even after the surgeon had to amputate his leg.

Every time I would see Jerry and ask how he was doing,

he would invariably give me a great big smile and say, “I am thankful for being on top of the ground and not below it. I’m thankful for the alarm that goes off each morning because it means I’m still alive. I am thankful for the rheumatism and arthritis because it means I’m not dead yet.” Then he would add with a twinkle in his eyes, “I am even thankful for the person behind me in church who sings off-key because it means I can still hear.”

Jerry was someone who knew how to be thankful, and I believe it was that “attitude of gratitude” that kept him going when lesser people would settle for death.

In my first parish on the Gaspé Coast in Quebec, I knew a lady who had been fighting cancer for three years. She loved the mountains. She loved the sea. She loved her little house. She never let a day go by without thanking God for being alive, and then living that day to the fullest. On some days that meant preparing a meal of cod fish and boiled potatoes for her husband; or working in the garden; or baking bread; or watching the northern lights; or resting quietly in her rocking chair on her porch.

I remember one conversation over tea. She told me that

her pain was becoming more intense, but that she was grateful that she had the time to suffer because so many die of cancer so quickly. Then she said something quite remarkable. She said, “Even the pain tells me I’m alive!”

That dear woman knew the meaning of thanksgiving. When she died, there was a smile on her face.

Soon after our daughter Allison was born, there was a wonderful movie on television called Kids like These. It was about an average American family who had a child; only this child had Down syndrome.

The hospital scene was a poignant one. When the parents are told that their baby has Down syndrome, there’s the usual shock and grief. Then the suggestion is made that perhaps the parents may want to put their baby in an institution or even give it up for adoption so that they can get on with their lives as normally as possible.

What would you do in a case like that? Since Heather and I have been in that exact situation, I can tell you it’s a tough decision – to let go of your baby or to embrace the baby as gift? What a choice! How do you respond? I

suppose it all depends on how you view the birth of new life – as feast or fast.

This Thanksgiving I hope all of us had a feast rather than a fast. But the real challenge is to feast your soul the day after Thanksgiving... and the day after that. To feast even when the news is bad or you are going through a tough time – to be grateful for the blessings rather than angry over the burdens – to be thankful for the gift of life and new life in Jesus rather than to be bitter for the life you never had, or wish you had, or had had but don't have now.

Today we are asking everyone, if you have not already done so, to submit your 2018 pledge to the church. There are many reasons to pledge, especially this coming year as Nativity embarks on a search for a new rector. You pledge to support the ministries of the church. You pledge to be part of the work of expanding the kingdom of God in the world. You pledge to share the good news of God's love in Jesus. You pledge because you believe in the Episcopal way of being Christian with its emphasis on a reasonable, open, inclusive Christianity with deep roots in tradition yet soaring into the future in the power of God's love – a church that embraces everyone with no outcasts.

These are all good reasons to pledge and support Nativity, but there is one more reason – you pledge as a way of showing your thanks for all God has given you and continues to give you each day of your life. The 16th century Protestant Reformer John Calvin said that the Christian life can be summarized in three words – grace, gratitude and generosity. I think he hit it on the mark. God gives us everything. All we can do is give back to God a token of all that God has given us. In a very real sense, every time I give, whether online or in the plate, I am saying “thank you” to God who always seems to give me more than I deserve.

It all comes down to love, doesn't it: God's love for us and our love for God?

Let me lay it on the line. The most important decision that any of us can make is to decide whether we believe in a God who loves us, who cares about us, who embraces us as his own in this life and in life to come. If you believe that God holds you precious in his sight, that God loves you every moment of your life, that God is with you all the time and in every circumstance, then this changes everything. How could you not be thankful to this God who created you, loves you and calls you

his own? The good news is that in Jesus Christ God has done just that.

Dr. Thomas Hilton tells about a British housekeeper who became quite ill and entered the hospital for treatment. While there, she met and befriended Johnny, a little boy with a terminal illness.

One day, Johnny's mother burst into the housekeeper's room with news that Johnny would not survive the day. Would the housekeeper please come and talk to him?

What would you say if you were in that situation? The housekeeper didn't mince any words. She sat down and said, "Listen, Johnny. God made you. God loves you. God sent his Son to save you. God wants you to come home with him."

After a moment of silence, Johnny said quietly, "Say it again." So the housekeeper repeated her words.

And with every ounce of sincerity he could muster, little Johnny leaned forward and said, "Tell God, 'Thank you.'"

Do you see what I mean? Sometimes people who have

no business being thankful are!

“Tell God, ‘Thank you.’”

**The Pilgrims knew the truth of what little Johnny said.
Do you?**

Dr. Gary Nicolosi

November 26, 2017

Text Luke 17: 11-19

Thanksgiving Sunday, A