

RUNNYMEDE UNITED CHURCH
The 14th Sunday after Pentecost
October 11, 2009, Thanksgiving Sunday
Living Our Thanks

8 years ago - and I still remember a wedding rehearsal on the Friday before Thanksgiving, in 2001.

I remember these words: *'Get it right. Think about what you have. Show everybody what this wedding means.'* The best man was speaking: urgently, shockingly.

The rehearsal had moved to that point at which bride and groom say their vows. Overcome by nerves and stress, by the packed pain of the previous month, both dissolved. The bride could barely speak; tears coursed down her cheeks; the groom, unable to look at her, kept his eyes on me, and stumbled over words that seemed right just weeks before when they wrote them and showed them to me.

Such moments are not unknown at wedding rehearsals. Usually, I've found, things go much better on the big day, and I can help nervous couples make that transition. But these were more than normal jitters. The groom's family, Americans, many from New York, had suffered enough tragedy in the last few weeks to explain anxiety now culminating in crumpling sobs.

I opened my mouth to express concern and confidence. Then I sensed the best man at my elbow, beginning what seemed a harangue. *'Get it together. It's important. Think about it: show how much you care. Be thankful you have each other.'*

Now, best men usually have their minds on speeches or rings; most seem content to leave coaching to me. Not that night. I might have tried to stop him, but he and I had already talked at some length about his experience of Sept. 11.

I stepped back, let him continue, realizing that his words came from the depths of his being - and of Ground Zero. Others seemed stunned, but bride and groom listened and responded. It was one of those times when we hear a message from beyond the immediate moment.

Chris, that best man, had told me that the day before he had attended the funeral of his other best friend, like him a New York firefighter. Chris had been torn between staying in New York for more funerals and coming to Toronto to support 'Dude', his childhood buddy, on his wedding day. He decided, he told

me, that it was time to dance as well as mourn, to begin to celebrate life and give thanks, to find a way forward. The wedding would help.

All of that came to a head when Chris saw his friend fumbling for words, and stepped forward, speaking in a strong voice: *'Get it together. Get it right. You love each other. That's what people need to see, right now!'* We gasped and gathered ourselves, inspired to continue.

'Truly God has done great things for us and therefore we rejoice!' wrote the psalmist, in a refrain which pervades liturgical thankfulness and most hymns of thanksgiving. But the acknowledgement of God's unmerited gifts is matched only by the equally mysterious reality of our mortality and the pain that comes with it. To give thanks is not to be blind to pain and grief, as we know only too well in this congregation, this weekend, as that best man knew in October, 2001. Thankfulness is not about denial or amnesia. Remembering the realities of our lives and our world in the midst of thanksgiving only drives home the fact that the gift of this day's celebration is truly full of wonder. In the Psalmist's words: *'God has done great things for us, and therefore we rejoice.'* The psalmist knew that 'tears of weeping' and 'songs of joy' are not mutually exclusive, that *'those who go out weeping... shall come home with songs of joy, bringing in their sheaves.'* What an exceptional message for Thanksgiving worship in a world racked by fear and pain, when, somehow, thankfulness and love become more important, more urgent, than ever.

Recent events seem not to leave much to be thankful for. Learning to live with the continuing effects of fear, pain and disaster, with personal stress and a community's great grief, with concerns about the creation God has given and put in our hands: these seem strange reasons for gratitude. To be thankful, somehow, we need to do more than get in touch with God's beautiful world, by waxing leaves or taking a walk in the woods.

Our texts recognize the ambivalence with which we give thanks, acknowledging that this weekend we come face to face with the fact that thankful hearts bear knots of pain, fear, and grief, as well as praise. How do we give thanks when every thought about the blessings of our lives leads to solemn reflection on those who aren't so blessed?

Consider Jesus words: 'Look at the birds of the air... the lilies of the field. Do not be anxious - but strive for the Kingdom of God.' On Friday, we heard Paul's words, from *Philippians*, when in prison, facing despair and death, he wrote: 'Do

not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God...

Thanking God alters the condition of our lives. That's what Jesus is getting at, pointing to the birds and lilies as reminders not to be overly anxious but to trust more fully in God's love. Gratitude helps you and me move towards healing and peace. Perhaps it helps us to see more clearly the importance of basics such as the world's beauty and possibility, and our relationships. When we give thanks, we centre our sense of self in relationship with God. Thanksgiving doubly blesses us: not only do we know we are blessed, we are moved to give back blessing. Then we feel connected, with others, with God, with love that can embrace and serve a suffering world.

Even facing pain and horror, God's people have always known that the impulse to be thankful is deep and mystical. When we are thankful, we do not forget. We remember. Then, at the most painful times, a sense of God's presence can overwhelm us: in music and prayer, in the touch of a friend's hand, in the salty taste of tears on our lips or the wild orange of an October day, in the words of a firefighter turned best man.

From prison, Paul wrote: *'Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, if there is ... anything worthy of praise, think on these things.'* That is part of the teaching of this weekend, its grief, its thanksgiving: let us learn to 'think on these things', and grow closer to God, grateful for simple joys: sharing a meal with loved ones, taking in each breath of fresh air, seeing the birds and the lilies of the fields.

Thanksgiving, we are told, brings thanks-living.

A study on family strengths concluded that one of the most important qualities found in strong families was appreciation. Families that are strong are strong in part, the study concludes, because people express to each other their appreciation for what others DO, for who they ARE. 'Think on these things'.

This Thanksgiving, some will be conscious of an empty chair at a table. It's hard to give thanks out of loss and despair.

But perhaps Bishop Colin Johnson's words can help: he asks that we pause and imagine looking down at a half-empty plate of plain food, and to respond in a way that can enable us to give thanks for living in a society where people do care for each other, and all have a place at the Thanksgiving table.

On this day, may we give thanks with all our brothers and sisters. Look around you. Find that which is good and thank God for it; find that which is caring and thank God and the person doing it; look around, look inside, look outside, and think on that which is worthy, true, beautiful.

Chris took his friend, the groom, in his arms. 'Love one another', he said. 'Be thankful.' He took the bride's hand: "We will make it. We will find a way to love and live.'

This Thanksgiving: can you can say, with Chris, the New York fire-fighter, with Paul, the imprisoned apostle, with the Psalmist, with Bishop Johnson, and with Jesus, that this is what matters: life is a gift; love is a blessing. Hear: and live with thanks and giving. Amen.

Lillian Perigoe