

*Thanks for the Memory...*  
Dr. Bob Hawkins

Truth be told, I can't stand community Thanksgiving services, particularly when hosted by neighborhood churches. It really isn't early onset of seasonal *Scrooge-itis*, a surly "Bah! Humbug!" for the work it takes to organize, announce, and welcome whomever might show up, perhaps even prepare coffee and snacks for pious attendees. Rather, it is the suspicion that the coin-toss-chosen host congregation is likely not the best site for the undertaking, if it works at all. The reality is likely a gathering of folks who don't really know folks from other congregations who might dare to venture out. Neither are they likely to "do worship" in similar ways, feel comfortable in others' houses of worship, or even understand all the do-dads, books, jargon, worship appointments including candles, lamps, and maybe even a hint of incense (*could it be?*) which might confront them. Or, for those folks who take for granted that they should be enveloped in a fog of incense or "sweet playing of the merrie organ" while glimpsing colorful vestments, pictures, and a blaze of candles, the empty caverns others find churchly leave them uncomfortable. And, might one ask, "Where're the drums and guitars?" Thanksgiving is hard to muster when distracted by what is or isn't present, or how others behave. "Reverence" for some is "certifiably dead" for others.

Thanksgiving Day has endured a checkered history since President Washington first declared "a day of public thanksgiving and prayer" as a fitting observance to thank the Almighty for the "...opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness" in 1789. The long struggle to establish relative peace and stability as a fledgling nation was fresh in the minds of its people. Nevertheless, the observance had been dropped by the time Jefferson was elected, revived or ignored thereafter depending upon folks' inclinations. Political negotiations between Congress and President Franklin D. Roosevelt led Congress to declare it a federal holiday on October 6, 1941, workers to be paid, and occurring [after a hasty December amendment] on the *fourth* Thursday of November each year. The confusion over the specific day is reflected in a cartoon clip in the 1942 movie, *Holiday Inn*. What can be gleaned from the holiday's history is that it was not established by the church but by federal decree. Throughout its history, though, it has best been celebrated as a day for family and friends to gather in their homes, shaped a bit by the national myth of Native Americans and colonial settlers coming to some sort of truce over dinner.

The poignant song "Thanks for the Memory," introduced by Bob Hope and Shirley Ross in *The Big Broadcast of 1938*, gets at the heart of why community Thanksgiving Services don't seem to work all that well. The two stars, having survived divorce, still are able to remember and give thanks, especially for the little things they experienced together. Mutual trials, joys, hopes, and disappointments are recounted in the song. In their honest and bittersweet reflection, the couple discover that they still are very much in love. Such songs and such reflection don't tend to happen at those community church services, simply because the folks attending don't know each other. Very likely, the congregations represented do not have any shared history. Neither have they ever done much together which can be remembered. What is left is the effort to pray some sort of generic "Christian" thanks because the day is upon us. Folks lose interest and the service is laid to rest as a good idea that didn't seem to work. Yes, that is indeed sad. What it reveals is that churches in geographic proximity likely represent

competing brands. Listening to folks talk about nearby congregations which draw folks from other congregations, including ours, sounds a bit like despair over unfairly fleecing the flock. Not much there to prompt gathering in thanksgiving!

The good news is this: each meeting for prayer and praise is at its heart a service of thanksgiving if Christians have taken to heart what we will hear this coming Sunday on Advent I. Jesus reminds us that the Son of Man will be arriving at an unscheduled time; be ready! Paul joins the conversation, declaring that we, God's lethargic people, need desperately to wake up, smell the coffee, and get on with the honorable life to which we are pledged. That means giving up self-gratifying preoccupations, particularly with quarreling and jealousy -- and that includes green-eyed envy of larger or more vibrant congregations than our own. Rather, we are to be decked out in our best finery. For the faithful that means to "put on Christ Jesus." Life lived in Christly garments is life lived in thanksgiving, learning to be thankful for the "little things" like Bob Hope and Shirley Ross reflect on. Life lived as people who are Christ to their neighbors is giving up being fixated on "lil' ol me" which leads invariable to "big ol meanness" of heart, mind, and spirit. And for us who gather weekly at the Lord's table, it means giving up the distractions, apathy, and ambivalence which blind us to the wonders all around us, wonders that deserve hearty, joyous thanks first and last.

The great table-prayer the Church offers includes not only "Words of Institution" but also memories of all God has done for us in good time and in bad. By remembering, we also are moved to give thanks. It is helpful to acknowledge that just saying the "Words of Institution" doesn't constitute giving thanks. The account of our Lord at table merely says "he gave thanks..." The gracious privilege Jesus extends is our own possibility to give the lavish thanks God's goodness daily deserves. Thanksgiving is the result of remembering and recounting relationships lived through good times and bad. Thus, the Church's table prayers often include words like these: ... *Remembering, therefore, his salutary command, his life-giving passion and death, his glorious resurrection and ascension, and the promise of his coming again, we give thanks to you, O Lord God Almighty, not as we ought but as we are able...* [ELW Eucharistic Prayer II]. In other words, "...thanks for the memory!"