

Seeing Things People Normally Can't See

Ephesians 1:15-23

November 20, 2011 (Thanksgiving Sunday) – Browns Point UMC

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Many of my friends, even my most liturgically-minded friends, have confessed this year, via Facebook and blogs, to listening to Christmas music all through the month of November. Yesterday, driving through Tacoma, Steven and I saw some really huge Christmas decorations already up at people's homes and watched a lady putting up lights outside her house in our neighborhood. The red cups came out at Starbucks on November 1, and their holiday decorations appeared earlier this week. Several American cities had their big Christmas tree lightings this weekend. Stores are all playing Christmas music over their speaker systems, and Christmas decorations have taken over where one might have found useful household items just a month ago. But it's November 20. Christmas is over a month away; Advent has not yet begun (we have another week before that). It's as if Thanksgiving is just slipping away – if we didn't have turkeys to roast, or get to take the day off of work, we might forget about it altogether.

The line between Thanksgiving and Christmas – or even the line between Halloween and Christmas – has been getting thinner year after year, especially as retailers try to beat one another to the punch to capture consumer dollars. And this year, the line between Thanksgiving and the next day, "Black Friday," is even pretty muddled, with Toys R Us stores opening at 9pm on Thursday, Thanksgiving Day; Walmart at 10pm; Best Buy, Macys, and Target opening at midnight despite online petitions to keep them closed, so you can shop all night long, stop by Starbucks for a holiday beverage on your way home (they'll be open as early as 3am), and sleep away your turkey and your shopping while the leftover stuffing becomes concrete on the dirty dishes still in the sink. Never mind if you have family in town or friends with whom to be thankful – surely they will all experience the indigestion caused by late-night, early-morning crowds at their local retailers if they want to spend time with you. And if you *work* in retail, well, you're just out of luck – maybe you can celebrate Thanksgiving on Saturday – after all, Black Friday has become a holiday all its own. One Marquette University student was quoted in the Milwaukee newspaper saying, "Honestly, I consider Black Friday my favorite 'holiday' of the year...Last year, we shopped from 3 a.m. to 8 p.m. - 17 hours straight of shopping. It's the best day of the year."¹

And it's not just those stores that open in the middle of the night to take your money and convince you that you *must have* things that you really do not need (because they're such "bargains!" after all) – the line gets blurred by the list-making of our consumption, in general. My own family is one in which we have always submitted "wish lists" for Christmas, and since my mom does not like crowds or shopping, and would never go to Target at midnight on Black Friday, my family is now requested to submit lists well in advance of Thanksgiving so that her Christmas shopping need not be hurried or frantic. I keep a running list of interesting items on my Amazon.com "wish list" year-round so I don't have to do a lot of work to make up a Christmas list during an already-hecky season – in years past, this was one of the more stressful parts of the holiday for me. "For what should I ask?" I would fret. "What if I don't think of the most important thing at the time I'm actually writing my list? How much research should I do to make sure I'll get the best possible gift this year?"

¹ <http://www.jsonline.com/business/black-friday-making-an-earlier-entrance-this-season-thanksgiving-night-dn33q04-134185778.html>

Retailers seem to be trying to make this easier on us, too – we recently got the Target holiday toy catalog in the mail, and in addition to being about a million glossy pages filled with plastic nonsense that no child *needs*, each photo of a toy has a little blank check-box next to it so your child, whether or not he or she can read or write, can go through and indicate his or her preferences (or demands) by checking the photos that seem most enticing.

All of this bothers me. It bothers me because I think it cheapens Christmas a little more each year, trying to make it about what we give others and get from them rather than the gift we've received from God through grace... but we'll talk about that more, maybe, next week, when the proper time to talk about Christmas has arrived. This year, I realize it also bothers me because Thanksgiving is getting lost in all the shopping and the list-making and the decorating and even the carol-singing.

And it may seem strange for the pastor to be so bothered by this lack of honor or respect for Thanksgiving, because Thanksgiving is not a liturgical holiday. It's not a Christian holiday: it's an American holiday. People all over our nation celebrate Thanksgiving, though they have no affiliation with the Christian Church and no loyalty to the Trinitarian God. And, on the other side, we church-goers offer our thanksgiving to God year 'round – so why the need for this special day?

Perhaps the answer is that we need Thanksgiving as a holiday to remind us of who we are called to be in the world: not consumers, but servants; not those entitled, but those blessed; not Creators ourselves, but creatures in every sense, owing our very being to another. Perhaps we should be thankful that Thanksgiving often falls on the very weekend of the first Sunday of Advent, because it has the potential to help us begin our waiting for Christ's arrival with the right mindset: not as those greedy for more, but as those grateful for the grace poured on us day after day, wishing for "more" only in terms of righteousness, justice, and expansion of God's reign. The problem is that we too often spend just a few minutes being thankful around the dinner table on Thursday before we launch into our list-making, bargain-hunting alter-ego selves.

I was not always the most chipper of adolescents, if you can believe it: in fact, I could be quite dour at times, wearing a curmudgeonly expression around the house despite having many luxuries, not to mention every necessity, of life at my fingertips. At some point my mother bought me this book: *14,000 things to be happy about*, thinking perhaps it would help me out of my grumpiness and into a more pleasant attitude. The book's author started recording "things that made her happy" in the 6th grade in a spiral notebook, and continued the practice, graduating eventually to a computer, for the next 20 years. She wrote down things like "chalkboards," "fog on the water," "holding hands," "hot-dog buns." Simple things. Everyday things.

Now, being happy and being thankful are not exactly the same thing: gratitude does not require "happiness," and happiness does not necessarily induce gratitude. We can be happy and totally selfish and greedy; we can be grateful even in the midst of struggle. That much is clear in our next hymn, "Now Thank We All Our God," which was written by a pastor during the Thirty Years' War: the only pastor in his town to survive a terrible plague, he did upwards of 4000 funerals that year, as many as 50 a day, including that of his wife. It was not a *happy* time, but still he was thankful. For some of us, *this* is not a happy time: we have lost loved ones, relationships are broken, we are worried for our children and our parents, our jobs are not secure, our economy is fragile, our health is failing, or we are plagued by doubts. There are many reasons we may not feel "happy." But this little book reminds us that we are called to notice all the little things in the world that *could* make us

happy, the things for which we are grateful. **Being the kind of person who notices and remembers all the gifts of life is a Christian discipline, indeed.**

And perhaps that's why the apostle, Paul, in our reading from Ephesians today, says, "I have not stopped giving thanks, every time I remember you." Every time I think of you, he says, I thank God for the gift of you. And then he prays (in N. T. Wright's translation), "I pray that God would give you, in your spirit, the gift of being wise, **of seeing things people normally can't see...** *Then* you will know exactly what the hope is that goes with God's call; *then* you will know the wealth of the glory of his inheritance in his holy people; and you will know the outstanding greatness of his power..."²

Paul gives thanks for the church at Ephesus every time he thinks of them, and then prays that they might see with God's eyes, see things others don't see: all the things with which God has blessed us; all the people God has put in our lives to challenge us, encourage us, and spur us on in the journey of faith; all the manifestations of God's presence and love in our midst.

It's hard to remember, in this culture of consumption, what it is to be people of gratitude, what it is to live as thankful people. But this is who God calls us to be, and when we see with God's eyes all the things for which we have gratitude, *then* we know the hope of God's call, the wealth of God's glory, the greatness of God's power...and we are grateful all over again.

Ask yourself today, and throughout this next week – even as you're standing in line at Target with your cart full of bargains in the wee hours of Friday morning – with what has God surrounded me that I simply have not seen? How might I pray for God to open my eyes? For what am I truly grateful? How might I foster a habit of seeing, a posture of gratitude in a season, a world, of consumption and greed?

We can begin here and now – take a moment to write down a few things for which you are grateful: gifts from God, people in your life, moments of grace – not the very most obvious things, or the easiest to think of, but those which you may not have taken time to see before. You might keep these as a reminder; or put them in the offering plate in a few minutes as a way of committing yourself to being a person of gratitude this season. For it is only as people of gratitude that we will begin to know the fullness of the hope in which we live. Amen.

² N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*, location 312 in Kindle version.