

An Attitude of Gratitude  
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz  
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“An Attitude of Gratitude” Pilgrim Church UCC, November 23, 2014—Thanksgiving Sunday  
(Matthew 25:31–46)

This week was difficult in our world, as there was a horrific attack at a synagogue in Israel. Four rabbis and a police officer were killed on Tuesday when two men walked into a morning prayer service and attacked. It was the deadliest attack in Jerusalem in six years. The images were hard to see: blood in the sanctuary, a bloody prayer book, a bullet that pierced sacred scripture, and the body bags of the victims. Yet on Wednesday morning, worshipers came to pray once again, with a security guard now stationed at the front entrance. One devout man in attendance told the Associated Press that this violence showed, "That our future in this world is dependent on God." [1]

Stories of people of faith attacked during worship are awful. Whether it's Jews at prayer in a synagogue, Muslims at prayer in a mosque, Christians at prayer in a church, Buddhists or Hindus at prayer in temples—it's particularly awful to encounter violence when we gather to praise the Divine. In our own country, the 16th Street Baptist Church was once bombed in Birmingham, killing four African American girls. This type of violence has happened here too. The General Secretary of the World Council of Churches declared, "There is a particular horror in any such attack which takes place at a place of worship . . . Violence, collective punishments and communal attacks can only further damage the prospects of peace and justice for all." [2]

As Americans prepare for Thanksgiving—a story like this attack of people at prayer should give us pause. To even be able to gather for worship and not be afraid is a gift. To witness people go back to worship the day after such violence is extraordinary. Frankly, it puts into stark perspective all of our excuses at times—that we're just too busy and stressed to take the time to worship God. Really? We hear words of defiance in the face of violence—that our future in this world is dependent on God. Depths of faith and trust.

What does God need from us to help create peace on earth? What does God seek from us in the face of such tragedies, when people encounter violence in a place and time of worship?

In our Christian tradition, we can turn to the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew to help answer these questions. Today is Reign of Christ Sunday, where we contemplate what our world would be like if Jesus ruled. If Jesus' teachings were at the heart of our lives, people would be judged as successful based on different standards from those of our society. The righteous are judged to be so because they fed and quenched the thirst of the hungry, they welcomed strangers, they gave clothes to people who had none, they took care of people who were sick, and they visited prisoners. Because they did all these things, they're morally right.

People don't get declared righteous because of how much they've achieved, how much money they make, or how attractive they are. God has a whole different set of priorities. It's like my theological buddy William Sloane Coffin once said, "Of God's love we can say two things: it is poured out universally for everyone from the Pope to the loneliest wino on the planet; and secondly, God's love doesn't seek value, it creates value. It is not because we have value that we are loved, but because we are loved that we have value." [3] God's love is poured out for everyone and God needs us to provide love for others because we are all valued so deeply by God.

What this passage highlights is God's reign as a metaphor on which we can contemplate human behavior. Speaking about God's reign makes it clear where our human rulers and the laws we enact have real deficiencies when it comes to justice and mercy.[4] We're gearing up for immigration reform. President Obama outlined some steps he'll take through executive action as politicians on both sides of the aisle continue to debate a pathway to US citizenship for undocumented immigrants. As Democrats or Republicans or Independents, many of us have personal opinions on immigration. But when we hear these words of Jesus', we're being challenged to think about applying our Christian faith to our politics, to our lives, to the way we see the world and the way we see men, women, and children who come across our borders.

Jesus says that when we care for, clothe, feed, and welcome the stranger, we are caring for, clothing, feeding, and welcoming Jesus himself. That's a powerful idea, a revolutionary idea, and what has become a Christian ethical ideal. It's no wonder that Jesus got into trouble with teachings like this, it's no wonder that Jesus got killed for teachings like this—because it may make people just as uncomfortable in 2014. This is why Jesus' Way has lasted—his teachings are timeless.

Thinking of God's reign and what this looks like, thinking of God as the one ultimately in charge defies hopelessness. We can't control events as much as we would like, we can't prevent senseless acts of violence carried out against people of faith or people streaming into our nation and the ethical questions that arise. But here's what we can do—we can feed the hungry, we can clothe the naked, we can visit those in prison, we can care for the sick, we can welcome the stranger. And when we do, the future looks brighter for everyone. When we do, we're showing our values as Christians. We don't value stuff as much as we value people. We don't value success as much as we value being our brother and sister's keeper. And when we forget or get wrapped up in what society tells us we should prioritize, we have Jesus to pull us back from the brink. “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”[5]

In Christian circles it's common to think about all of this as the difference between wearing a bib or an apron as a church. When we wear bibs, we're looking to be fed by someone else. We want to be served. We think that the Church exists to meet our needs. And if our needs aren't met—then we may say, “Well I'm just not being fed here.”

When we wear aprons, we're looking to feed others. We think of the Church as existing to meet the needs of a hungry world, a world desperate to hear the Gospel and to experience the mercy of God through us. When we wear aprons, we're not afraid to get our hands a little dirty in service. We're looking to grow our own faith and we take personal responsibility for that. We know that our faiths grow when we help others grow alongside us. Over all, we're not so caught up in needing to be fed that we forget that our job is to feed others like Jesus taught us.

It's often easier to wear a bib than an apron. You sure can be passive and content when you wear a bib waiting for somebody to come feed you. But wearing an apron helps us adopt an attitude of gratitude that makes all the difference. There's nothing like serving others that forces us to get a grip, as Jesus reels us back in to remember what truly matters. There's nothing like being grateful for God's gifts in our lives that helps us to be more compassionate toward the stranger.

To that end, there's this New England Thanksgiving tradition that Warren Johnson told me about called the Five Kernels of Corn. The Mayflower landed in November of 1620—what a fabulous time to be in Massachusetts! It was a rough start for those Pilgrims, so much so that (supposedly) the daily ration of food became five kernels of corn per person. The tradition is that some old New England families continued to gather at Thanksgiving and place five kernels

of corn on each plate to begin the feast. They took the time to pause and remind their children of the sufferings and hardships that made possible the settlement.

Let's not forget that those Pilgrim were immigrants, strangers in a strange land. A political cartoon I've seen concerning this idea is a Native American waiting for a boatload of Pilgrims on the shoreline. The Native American declares, "Welcome to Plymouth. You're illegal and we'll need \$5,000, a background check, and then you can get a two year guest visa." [6] It's wise on our part to consider modern political issues in light of our history and our Christian faith!

When families across this region would gather for Thanksgiving, some took time to remember their history with those five kernels of corn. The first kernel came to symbolize the past and the many people who sacrificed for others to survive. The second kernel was for our families and the love we have for each other. The third kernel reminded folks of God's creation—autumn beauty and harvest and God's blessings. The fourth kernel was for friends, new and old. And the fifth kernel represented God's love for us. This small gesture cultivated an attitude of gratitude.

As we gather for Thanksgiving meals, let's remember where we came from, who we are, and who Jesus is calling us to be. Let's remember our friends and families, and the hungry and the naked and the sick and the prisoner and the stranger—five groups of God's children who need to hear words and see acts of justice and compassion now. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] "Jerusalem attack: Synagogue reopens for morning prayers," BBC News, 19 November 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30110999>

[2] "WCC Condemns Attack on Worshipers at Jerusalem Synagogue," 18 November 2014, <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/wcc-condemns-attack-on-wor...>

[3] William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*, 6.

[4] Laurence Hull Stooky, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church*, 140.

[5] Matthew 25:40

[6] Bradford Political Cartoon.