Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Thanksgiving Sunday

November 18, 2018

Neal MacPherson

LIVING GRATEFULLY Joel 2:21–27

Psalm 126

Philippians 4:4–9

Matthew 6:25–34

Nearly a century ago, the renowned American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wondered whether or not in an industrial civilization a genuine spirit of thanksgiving was really possible. He said that our dependency on machines and the material goods they produce had caused human beings to become more and more separated from the natural order of things. He noted that past generations of people were far more attached to the land. They depended on what the earth could produce. They knew they were subject to the precarious forces of nature and so they were genuinely thankful when a harvest turned out to be plentiful. The words of Psalm 126 come to mind:

*May those who sow in tears*

*reap with shouts of joy.*

*Those who go out weeping, bearing the*

*seed for sowing,*

*shall come home with shouts of joy,*

*carrying their sheaves.* (verses 5–6)

Reinhold Niebuhr went on to say that human beings had become so skilled at producing things themselves that Thanksgiving had become “increasingly the business of congratulating the Almighty upon his most excellent co-workers, ourselves.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

No one would want to return to a time before the convenience of indoor plumbing and refrigeration and electricity, but it also seems that we have become completely enamored with the gadgets of modern life. People these days are becoming so attached to their cell phones that they are oblivious of their surroundings, including the beauty of the natural world. In Vancouver, not long ago, I was walking along a sidewalk and I had to dodge a runner who nearly ran into me, all because she was glued to her cell phone even as she was running!

Of course, climate change is making us aware once again of the precarious forces of nature, which brings us closer to the life experience of former generations. We need only think of the devastating fires still raging in California. But that is ironic, is it not? Climate change itself is a result of our reliance on fossil fuels, which have been used to support our ever-expanding economies, which in turn depend upon the production of more and more things.

In such a world of ours, is a genuine spirit of gratitude possible? To be genuinely grateful, we will have to recover the value of inter-dependency. We are truly dependent upon each other for our wellbeing. And all of us are dependent upon the earth and its resources. In turn, the health of the earth depends upon our faithful stewardship of all that God has given us. We live in a web of inter-dependency. This is what the native, indigenous peoples of the earth continue to teach us.

American culture, however, does not seem to value inter-dependency very much. To the contrary, it seems to exhibit a selfishness and a self-securing that threatens to destroy our common life. Selfishness says it’s all about me— my safety, my health, my possessions, my security, my attractiveness, my success, my achievements, my needs.

On the other hand, lucky we live Hawai‘i. Yes, we too are subject to the selfishness of American culture, but here we can still find people who value inter-dependency. We can find it in our neighborhoods and especially in the neighborhoods of those who struggle to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table. Here, it is a common practice to share an abundance of fruits and vegetables with our neighbors. It is common to hear our neighbors say, if we been away, that they have missed seeing us around. “I was hoping that you are OK,” they say.

Just yesterday, we were speaking of such things with Leilani’s sister-in-law. She is planning a large gathering in memory of Leilani’s brother who died about three weeks ago. People have come forward, offering everything needed for a dinner celebration numbering in the hundreds. Leilani’s brother had helped so many others through the years that it now has become an opportunity for his friends to help his family in return. This is “local style” and I trust that we never lose this way of life that holds us together as a community.

It is in Christian community that we may also learn this value of inter-dependency. During the past two years while I have been with you, it has been enriching for me to hear the stories that have shaped your lives. Your stories tell of a past filled with struggle and the tireless efforts of those who have gone before you to provide for you. In so many ways, this church community is their gift to all of us. From them, we have learned that we do not live for ourselves, but for one another, and for the sake of those who will come after us.

We acknowledge the blessings we have received from past generations, and our faith also teaches us to value the creation itself for giving us all that we need. Surely, we know, deep down, that we cannot live without the *‘āina* and the *kai,* which sustain us, and the love of family and friends, who tell us who we are. In the words of Brian Wren’s lovely hymn:

*We are not our own. Earth forms us,*

*human leaves on nature’s growing vine,*

*Fruit of many generations,*

*seeds of life divine.*

*We are not alone. Earth names us;*

*past and present, peoples near and far,*

*Friends and family and strangers*

*show us who we are.*

Our observance of Thanksgiving presents an opportunity to acknowledge the value of inter-dependency, which indeed declares that we depend upon the earth and one another for our wellbeing. And what I would like to suggest this morning is that this acknowledgment of inter-dependency is the very source of a genuine spirit of thanksgiving. Gratitude for what we have or what we have gained for ourselves just doesn’t cut it. Gratitude for how others and the earth itself have blessed us and how it is God who has given us all that we need in the first place can lead us to a genuine spirit of Thanksgiving.

Living gratefully is the one antidote to the self-securing spirit of our age. It seems that securing ourselves against all that would threaten us has become a way of life. It has all become about “me.” But this is a dead end street simply because it causes us to be anxious. We become fearful and anxious that we do not have enough to make us secure as human beings. We grasp for more and more.

Our reading from the Gospel of Matthew suggests a different path. Instead of worrying about ourselves excessively and how much we have, why not look at the birds of the air and the lilies of the field? They will teach us how to live. They are not anxious. Birds fly freely, and lilies bask in beauty. It is God who feeds them and clothes them. Will not God, then, feed us and clothe us? Anxiety bred of self-securing cannot add one day to our lives. It can only deprive of us of our humanity.

Better to live gratefully. Better to understand that we are inter-dependent beings and that we must learn, as those who have gone before us learned, how to rely on the goodness of God, the kindness and generosity of others, and the blessings of the earth itself. Thus will our celebration of Thanksgiving be pleasing in God’s sight. May it be so. Amen.

1. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic)* Westminster John Knox Prfess, 1929, 1980) 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)