

# Hearts Strengthened In Holiness

## 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

How can we thank God enough for you  
in return for all the joy that we feel before our God  
because of you?

Night and day we pray most earnestly  
that we may see you face to face  
and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

Now may our God and Father himself  
and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you.

And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love  
for one another and for all,  
just as we abound in love for you.

And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness  
that you may be blameless before our God and Father  
at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all the saints.

## **Hearts Strengthened In Holiness**

I Thessalonians 3:9-13

November 28, 2021

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### **I.**

I wrote this sermon very early Thanksgiving morning sitting in my recliner, by the fire, at the lake with a steaming cup of coffee in hand. Certainly in the cold weather months, this is where and how most of my sermons get written. This setting is one of my “happy places,” where a sense of gratefulness and thanksgiving for my life flows greatest and most easily. It is my ardent hope that everyone of you had an opportunity this week to reflect on *your* blessings and gratitude in celebrating the Thanksgiving Holiday. Owing to certain events which transpired earlier in the week, of which I will regale you shortly, I did a little digging as to the origins of this national day of thankfulness.

### **II.**

As is almost always the case when taking a hard look at just about anything, there is more than meets the eye or remains in the brain when it comes to Thanksgiving; certainly beyond the four Fs which have become so familiar to us in this country: food, football, family and friends. Though we like to consider Thanksgiving a uniquely American tradition, and with good reason, it is anything but our own as prayers of thanks and special thanksgiving ceremonies are common among most of the world’s religions after harvests and at other times and occasions. At the root of our American experience are English traditions which arose out of the Protestant Reformation, but also incorporated aspects of a harvest or hunt festival common to every culture and people across the globe and throughout the ages.

### **III.**

In the English tradition, days of thanksgiving and special thanksgiving religious services became important during the English Reformation in the reign of Henry VIII, and in reaction to the large number of religious holidays on the Catholic calendar. Before 1536 there were 95 Church holidays, plus 52 Sundays, when people were required to attend church and forego work and sometimes pay for expensive celebrations. The 1536 reforms reduced that number to 27, but some Puritans wished to eliminate every Church holiday;

*including* Christmas and Easter. All of these holidays were to be replaced by Days of Thanksgiving or Days of Fasting, in response to events that the Puritans viewed as acts of special providence (calling for the former) and unexpected disasters or threats of judgement from on high (calling for the latter). Such a theological rationale is what became the basis for our American Thanksgiving.

#### **IV.**

Thanksgiving, as we know it in this country, can be traced directly back to the Puritans; they were, however, kind of a funny bunch. As they are our sister forebears in faith, along with the Scotch Presbyterians, they merit a little deeper dive. In the simplest terms, Puritans were English Protestants in the 16th and 17th centuries who sought to purify (hence the name) the Church of England from the practices of the Roman Catholic Church out of which it arose; maintaining that the Church of England had not been fully reformed and should become more “Protestant.” The Puritans advocated greater purity of worship and doctrine, as well as personal and corporate piety. Puritans adopted a Reformed theology and, in that sense, were Calvinists just as we are in the Presbyterian Church. The Puritans were in no way a monolith group, however. Rather, it was comprised of many strands based on the degree of “purity” for which they advocated.

#### **V.**

Some Puritans even favored a complete separation from all other established Christian denominations opting, instead, for autonomous “gathered churches” made up only of those who had undergone a conversion experience (root of Evangelicalism). Numbering among these Separatist and independent strands of Puritanism, were the “Brownists” who had fled religious persecution in England, first for the tolerance of 17th-century Holland in the Netherlands; and, later, to the New World on the ship the *Mayflower*. These “Pilgrims” as they came to be called, have long been credited with celebrating the first “Thanksgiving” on American soil in 1621 (as most of us learned in grade school while making turkeys from hand-tracings and shoe and hat buckles from tin foil). However, two years earlier, in 1619, Thirty-eight English settlers from the ship, *Margaret*, held a religious feast of Thanksgiving upon landing on the shores of what is now the Commonwealth of Virginia.

## **VI.**

Unsurprisingly, for several centuries there was great disagreement between Virginia and Massachusetts as to which state should be credited with celebrating the first American Thanksgiving. It wasn't until November 5th of 1963 that the matter was finally settled (kind of) by then president John F. Kennedy in issuing Proclamation 3560, which states:

*Over three centuries ago, our forefathers in Virginia and in Massachusetts, far from home in a lonely wilderness, set aside a time of thanksgiving. On the appointed day, they gave reverent thanks for their safety, for the health of their children, for the fertility of their fields, for the love which bound them together, and for the faith which united them with their God.*

Such are the historical and religious roots of our endearing and beloved Thanksgiving holiday here in this nation. While football is only a recent development, and how the whole "turkey thing" got started is a story for another year, family and friends have always been the most cherished and important part of Thanksgiving.

## **VII.**

Owing to this wonderful truth about the spirit of Thanksgiving, and because our church has always had a warm heart for the international students who find their way to us, a couple of weeks ago I stood in the pulpit and invited those students who have been attending worship, along with any of their friends who, like them, would be stuck on campus during the break with the dining hall closed, to come to the manse and enjoy a Thanksgiving feast; one which Linda would literally spend the entire day preparing. I'd like to say that came out wrong, but we all know this is pretty much the way it is (YEAH Linda! Pastor's spouse extraordinaire.) It turns out that only one of the four students who regularly make the long walk down to town on Sundays were to be on campus over break, a young lady named Faith, from Ghana and Nigeria, but five other friends and fellow international students would be pleased to accept the invitation also.

## **VIII.**

So it was that this past Tuesday, Linda, Tucker, Arlo and I fussed about the house waiting for the arrival of our our six dinner guests; only one of whom we had ever met, but even in her case we'd never actually seen her face without a mask. The appointed time came and went, with the turkey and all the fixings

done and ready to be served, and we started to wonder if they might not show. Then, a few minutes later Linda received a phone call from Faith. Turns out they were standing out in front of Dr. Healy's office not sure which house was ours. Linda told them to keep on walking and she went out in front of our house to wave them hither once they reached the corner across from Morgans. As we awaited their imminent arrival, it occurred to me that it was no small thing for these international students, clearly strangers in a very strange land, to be walking around Canton, in the dark, and approach a strange house to knock on the door. Good for them.

## **IX.**

All this on top of coming to the "Pastor's House," with all the ramifications this might entail; and not necessarily in a good way. You can imagine, then, that they were more than a little shy as I held the door and Linda shepherded them into the manse. Judging from the amount of time and encouragement required for them to simply take off their coats and move beyond the foyer, it dawned on me that this might be a very long evening indeed. Finally, they made it to the dining room, though they still huddled together in a group. Introductions were offered, and we slowly took the daring action of removing our masks. I will confess that this was the one aspect of the operation which caused the greatest amount of trepidation. Beyond the sheer effort of feeding ten people, the six of them and the four of us, the fear of spreading COVID was the greatest obstacle which we freely admitted we would need to overcome in order to sit down together and share a meal. However, in for a dime, in for a dollar; and, so far so good on the COVID front.

## **X.**

Soon enough, however, they took their seats while I carved the turkey and Linda set out bowl after bowl of food: stuffing, melon cranberries, green bean casserole, two tofu dishes (one guest is a vegetarian) along with the wonderful potato casserole and fresh baked dinner rolls which Carolyn Zanta, Rob Ewy and their daughters, Kate and Emily, had so generously contributed and graciously drove over from Potsdam still warm from their oven. After asking if there other religious traditions of which to be aware, I invited them to grace and we stood around the table and held hands in a circle. We then commenced to dine, and there was no hiding the fact they were all pretty enthusiastic about the table Linda had so lovingly set and put before them.

Given that mouths were quickly given over to the more immediate task at hand, the already sparse conversation quickly ground to a halt.

## **XI.**

In an effort to be a good host I tried to fill the silence with niceties, but every time I did, they stopped eating, put their folks down, and turned to give me their full attention. However, soon enough the atmosphere eased as the trick of sharing a meal together started to work its magic, and we began to tell one another of our lives and ourselves. Around the table sat Vyara from Bulgaria, Phillip from Kenya, Anamo from Ethiopia, Janeil from Jamaica, Sezim from Kyrgyzstan, and Faith from Ghana and Nigeria; a veritable United Nations representing four of the earth's continents.

By the time I launched into dishes, and Linda started to clear and compile take-home boxes for each, the ice had completely broken and its water now boiled over into a profusion of laughter, spirited conversation and even a little busting of the chops. As we stood and watched these six, along with our two sons, become thick as thieves, Linda and I knowingly looked at each other: mission accomplished (see photo below).

## **XII.**

Beyond the offering of food, the real gift given that night was the reminder to all of us of the true spirit of Thanksgiving; not only in this nation, but across the world. As the Apostle Paul wrote in today's scripture in his first letter to the Thessalonians: "How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?"

In a world where joy is too often hard to find amid the unexpected disasters and perceived judgements from on high, it is tremendously important that we pause from time to time to celebrate with thanksgiving the special providence God bestows upon us as families, as a people, as a nation, and as an increasingly connected global community. One of the best reasons for attending church is also very often the most overlooked, as it is here that a sense of gratefulness and thanksgiving for our lives flows greatest and most easily.

### **XIII.**

Though it unfortunately is not true for every congregation, and while the term “Happy Place” doesn’t quite do it full justice, that a church can be such a place is both a gift and a miracle; especially in this world and in these times. For it is here, in a congregation such as this, that hearts are strengthen in holiness, as we increase and abound in love for one another and, especially, for all.

We began today with a history lesson about the Puritans and the roots of our American Thanksgiving tradition. We end today with the recognition that the purest form of religion begins, and ends, with the depth of one’s gratitude and thanksgiving. Gratitude and thanksgiving for the bounty and blessings of our lives together, for a nation created by those seeking to simply worship God in their own unique way and a tolerance for those who choose to do so in ways which may be very different than our own, and gratitude and thanksgiving for a child born in a manger through whom God would so love the world. Amen.



Vyara, Phillip, Anamo, Tucker, Arlo, Janeil, Faith and Sezim.