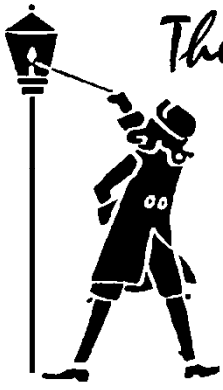

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IN CHRIST AND FOR CHRIST - TO KNOW CHRIST AND TO MAKE HIM KNOWN

November 24, 2008

THANKS TO WHOM FOR WHAT?

My yoga instructor shared some of her reasons for thanksgiving today as we began class. I appreciated her grateful spirit. It also made me think about the practice of thanksgiving. Many Americans thoroughly enjoy this holiday, and they do so with genuinely grateful hearts, but without any religious expressions to their thanksgiving.

The question popped into my mind, To whom are these non-religious people thankful? Doesn't thanksgiving require a recipient, someone to whom gratitude is directed? Dictionaries have not helped me. I cannot find a definition that includes this requirement. I did find, under the synonyms for the entry of "grateful" this definition, "THANKFUL indicates a disposition to express gratitude by giving thanks, as to a benefactor or to a merciful Providence." (Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language)

The definition for "grateful" further supports this notion of a recipient. Webster's defines it, "warmly or deeply appreciative of kindness or benefits received." Aha! How does someone *receive* something as a benefit unless it has been *given* by someone?

I suppose people may simply burst forth in expressive gratefulness, "I am so thankful to be alive," without directing that thankfulness to anyone in particular. In this case, however, it would seem that the word "happy" could be substituted for the word "thankful" to more accurately describe the person's emotional state. When one uses the word thankful, it begs for a recipient of the expression, someone to whom the gratitude is directed.

So, when a non-religious person expresses thanksgiving for something like her children, to whom is she thankful? Is she thankful to the obstetrician who delivered her children? Is she grateful to the pediatrician who has given them good care? Does she thank her husband for giving her children? If that is not her intention, then why use the word thanksgiving? Why not just celebrate the holiday of Happiness?

Another consideration emerges from a discussion of this practice. Thanksgiving requires recognition of true value. The word "appreciation" used in the definition for grateful indicates this notion. The entry for "appreciate" reads, "to value or regard highly; place a high estimate on." The degree to which we are thankful depends upon our ability to measure the value of anything we possess.

Value has a tendency to be relative. After backpacking for two weeks and sleeping on the ground, a twenty-year old cheap mattress may be highly valued to the hiker. To the child who eats only two meals a day consisting of only rice, the vegetables my children refuse to eat will probably be treated with precious desirability. As Joni Mitchell wrote, "Don't it always seem to go, that you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone?" Value tends to rise with scarcity.

Instead of measuring relative value, we need to learn how to discern intrinsic value. We are too accustomed to hearing about people paying hundreds of thousands of dollars for a small piece of cardboard with a picture on it simply because it was produced in 1914 and it bore the name Babe Ruth. The intrinsic value of that cardboard might be a few pennies. If we consider the art work, it might be a few dollars. If you found that card in a shoe box in your attic, however, I am sure you would respond to the relative value rather than the intrinsic value.

This orientation to relative value is why Americans become so thankless. When we possess something in abundance we reduce its relative value and overlook its intrinsic value. When was the last time you were really grateful, I mean truly thankful, for the water you drank that day? In Africa, over 300 million people do not have access to clean water. Consequently, nearly half of Africa's population, about 750 million people, suffer from one of the six major water-related diseases. Water ranks as one of the most valued commodities of life. In pleasant spring weather, you could live only about ten days without water. Do you see the difference between intrinsic value and relative value?

We really need to retrain our value systems. Our skewed calibration of value contributes to our anemic gratefulness. One week a year we try to retune our gratitude receptors so that we can express some semblance of thanksgiving. When James writes, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above," (1:17) what do you include under the heading of "good gifts?" This list should be rather lengthy, considering it includes *every* good gift.

Our thanksgiving should also be directed to the proper recipient. John the Baptist told his followers, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven" (John 3:27). Here was a man who understood that thanksgiving must be directed to Someone, not dangling in a fog of emotions.

Hopefully, these thoughts will enhance your Thanksgiving celebration this year, and distinguish it from your non-religious neighbor, or your other-religious family member.

Pastor Stan