



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – November 18, 2007 “God-Giving, Thanks-Giving, Self-Giving”  
The Reverend Harold E. Masback, III

## **Psalms 116**

<sup>1</sup>*I love the LORD, because he has heard my voice and my supplications. Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live. The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish. Then I called on the name of the LORD: ‘O LORD, I pray, save my life!’*

<sup>5</sup>*Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; our God is merciful.*

<sup>6</sup>*The LORD protects the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me. Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.*

<sup>8</sup>*For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling. I walk before the LORD in the land of the living. <sup>9</sup>I kept my faith, even when I said, ‘I am greatly afflicted’; I said in my consternation, ‘Everyone is a liar.’*

<sup>12</sup>*What shall I return to the LORD for all his bounty to me?*

<sup>13</sup>*I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD, I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people. Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful ones. O LORD, I am your servant; I am your servant, the child of your serving-maid. You have loosed my bonds. <sup>17</sup>I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the LORD. I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people, in the courts of the house of the LORD, in your midst, O Jerusalem. Praise the LORD!*

## **John 13:34-35**

<sup>34</sup>*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. <sup>35</sup>By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’*

## **Colossians 3:15-17**

<sup>15</sup>*And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. <sup>16</sup>Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. <sup>17</sup>And whatever*

*you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

We’re almost there. The stuffing fixings are in the bread box, the cranberry fixings are in the fridge, the Butterball is in the freezer, and here we are, already half way through Thanksgiving Sunday worship. We are just about ready for Thanksgiving. So here’s my question of the morning. What comes after Thanksgiving?

Of course the answer depends on your situation: but if you have ever had family over, I suspect you are familiar with an age-old male ritual. We push back from the dinner table, earnestly declare, "Better than ever dear! Don't touch those dishes, we'll get them.....right after the game." We settle into the den, turn on the ball game, and then . . . and then we promptly fall asleep.

But what happens after that? What I want to explore together this morning is "Where does Thanksgiving lead?" "What is Thanksgiving for?" The very questions seem odd to us, for the Pilgrims' celebration has been stripped down until it seems little more than a polite two step: God has been generous, we pause to say "thank-you," now back to your regularly scheduled life.

Of course, there is a kernel of truth in this model. The Bible does call upon us to respond to God's grace with thanksgiving, and the Pilgrim feast was a pause to say "thank you." Perhaps we should be grateful that there is any moment in the national consciousness when we offer gratitude to God

But isn't something missing from this model? It reduces our thanksgiving to a form of theological etiquette - something we owe God as a matter of good religious form. It shifts our hearts from grateful delight to dutiful obligation.

It doesn't have to be this way. All of us have experienced the kind of dynamic, joyful gratitude that inspired the Psalmist, Jesus and Paul in this morning's

readings. Think of the time that girl's eyes sparkled "yes" as you nervously stammered your way through asking her out. Or the time the doctor stepped out of your little boy's hospital room and said, "that should do it, he's going to be fine." You didn't need Amy Vanderbilt to tell you what to do then. Your heart swelled naturally with generosity, with delight, with a spontaneous expression of gratitude you could barely contain.

In fact, you and I get a chance to see God's dynamic of gratitude in action every time our youth minister, Kelly Hough, is in this pulpit. If you've ever spent any time with Kelly, you've probably learned that she counts God's call into ministry as one of the greatest gifts she has ever received. But you don't have to take her word for it, you can see it in her face when she takes the pulpit. Kelly doesn't owe gratitude, Kelly feels gratitude. You can see it in her eyes when she preaches, when she prays, when she leads a children's message. God's gifts to Kelly just stir up joy and gratitude naturally. God-giving leads Kelly to thanks-giving.

But the dynamic doesn't end there. Watch Kelly as she goes about her week, and you'll see that God-giving leads to thanks-giving leads to self-giving. Watch her for instance, with Mimi Flagg. Mimi is a young woman of 21 with a genetic condition called "Cri du Chat Syndrome." Her condition makes articulation and participation very challenging. Then again, lacking the inhibitions of intellectualization, Mimi is a wonder of spontaneous expression.

Mimi never has been and never will be in any of Kelly's youth groups. She'll probably never write an evaluation, never serve as a reference, never have a way of responding materially to Kelly's ministry. But Kelly has always made a special place for Mimi, always engaged her as a child of God, always taken time to play with Mimi. They both love the American Girl doll collection, so, whether at Mimi's house or in Kelly's office, they keep up on their favorite American Girl outfits. God-giving has led to thanksgiving has led to self-giving.

But the dynamic doesn't end there either. Last spring, we formally ordained Kelly into the Christian ministry. When Mimi's mom told her that Kelly was going to be ordained, Mimi insisted, "I go! I go!" So

B.J. brought Mimi along, and they sat pressed up against the windows in the next to last pew on the left.

The service of ordination proceeded with the customary pomp. Kelly swore to serve the congregation, the congregation swore to support Kelly, the youth group kids prayed over her, and, the clergy laid on hands. We sang the closing hymn, the clergy recessed, and finally Kelly recessed down the aisle with her new robe and stole.

As Kelly neared the end of the aisle, the clergy gathered to congratulate her, but, just before Kelly got to us, Mimi jumped up excitedly, struggled across the legs and laps pinning her in the pew, stumbled out into the aisle and threw her arms around Kelly in a huge, long hug.

It was one of the purest, most beautiful expressions of love I have ever seen in this meeting house. We ministers all looked at each other, smiling though our tears and nodding silently, for we were all thinking the same thing. The denomination, the congregation, the kids, the clergy had all ordained Kelly, but now, in that hug, Christ was ordaining Kelly. "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." [Matthew 25:39.]

That's where genuine gratitude leads in everyday life. God-giving, leads to thanks-giving, leads to self-giving, leads to, guess what, even more God-giving. Genuine gratitude is generative, transforming us and transforming the way we engage neighbor and world. Genuine gratitude is not a mannered act of etiquette; it's an eternal wave lifting our hearts as it rolls through humanity.

You and I are being lifted by that eternal wave even as we worship together this morning. Do you see it? You need only look around you. Look at the lines of our beautiful meeting house, the vibrance of our congregation, the beauty of our town. You are looking at waves set in motion by the gratitude of our forebears. We are the beneficiaries of countless sacrifices made by men and women whose hearts overflowed with gratitude for the gifts God had showered on them. God giving, leading to thanksgiving, leading to self-giving.

For two-hundred and seventy-five years, parishioners have sat in these pews, reflected on God's gifts, and gratefully committed themselves to passing the gifts

along. For two-hundred and seventy-five years, ministers have risen in this pulpit and asked their congregations to reflect on God's gifts and the dynamic of Thanksgiving.

In November, 1800, two-hundred and seven Thanksgivings ago, the minister who rose to this pulpit was Reverend Justus Mitchell. He had graduated from Yale in 1776 and had been called by this Congregation in the closing years of the Revolutionary War. Mitchell took as his text that morning a passage from First Chronicles similar to our texts this morning and proceeded to describe God's call to thanksgiving as a three-part call. In essence, the three parts were God-giving, thanksgiving, and self-giving.

As Reverend Mitchell put it, *"It is impossible for the inhabitants of this state, or of this assembly to celebrate this day, in a proper manner unless they know some of the benevolent acts of God and altho many of the glorious acts of God may be fresh in memory, yet still it is proper to repeat them, that they may be revived in the mind and the heart awaken into a new flame of gratitude and praise."* Mitchell traced the blessings poured out on the congregation, beginning in 1733 and working his way up to the Revolutionary War.

*"Great wars have been waged against us; fleets and armies have been sent to subdue us, and desolation, hath been made in many parts of our land, many of our pleasant towns have been burnt, and distress hath spread far, and wide--*

*In all our dangers God appeared for our help--and gave wisdom to our councils and fortitude to our armies; and disposed other nations to think favorable to our cause."*

Having recounted God's many gifts to the Congregation, Mitchell passed on to thanksgiving:

*"Secondly, another branch of duty, to which we are to attend this day, is to give thanks unto the Lord...It is but a small thing to say to a benefactor I thank you: the important thing is to feel thankful."*

Notice how quickly Reverend Mitchell got right to the heart of the matter. He knew the transforming potential of Thanksgiving is fueled by the passion of gratitude. So Mitchell asked his congregation if they should not be singing for joy, saying:

*"Let our hearts be alive with gratitude. When we recount God's deeds towards our land, and towards us as individuals, how can we refrain from giving thanks? Shall we not break forth into singing? Shall we not say praise him all ye saints: sing to his name?"*

Reverend Mitchell closed his sermon by channeling the passion of thanksgiving to the cause of posterity.

*"The question then arises, how shall our blessings be preserved and transmitted to posterity. We have had committed to our care a good land full of blessings, and privileges of all kinds, but how shall they be secured?"*

*If therefore we would secure our blessings to posterity, we must be virtuous, and choose virtuous rulers, live in peace and maintain religious order, and set good examples and teach good doctrine to the rising generation and by such conduct, we shall be instruments of transmitting to future generations, a good land, enriched with the most distinguished privileges, and blessings of any country on earth...."*

And so the dynamic of thanksgiving ripples across the generations: God-giving, leading to thanksgiving, inspiring self-giving. One hundred generations after Jesus gave his life, ten generations after Justus Mitchell preached from this pulpit, the gift has now passed into our hands. How far into the future, how widely throughout creation will it roll?

The answer turns on one question: will we view our many blessings as the gracious gifts of God and forebears, or will we view them as the just deserts of our own genius? God's great blessings to this congregation may stir transforming gratitude, but they may also stir self-satisfied pride. The great cycle of thanksgiving will surely be broken if we conclude our gifts have been wrought by the strength of our own arms, for when a generation forgets the gifts of God and forebears, it forgets its obligations to posterity as well.

Listen to one last call across the years from Justus Mitchell. On January 5, 1806, Reverend Mitchell was fifty-two years old. He had been serving this congregation for over twenty three years. Within a month he would be dead, and his sermon manuscript for that day is the last we have. The handwriting is painstaking and much larger than in his earlier manuscripts. His tone is philosophical, the tone of a

valedictory. Canaan Parish had become increasingly prosperous, but Reverend Mitchell left his congregation a word of caution:

*"The members of this society, may be ready to boast of great things. . . .For more than 20 years this society hath experienced great peace and prosperity. The inhabitants have been fed and cloathed, and great harmony hath subsisted. Our fathers erected this house, to worship the God of their fathers and have left it for us to immitate their escample. We perhaps are ready to boast as tho we had done all this? When it is all of God,*

*He disposed our fathers to build this house; and united them to undertake it, or it never could have been built; and he enabled them to esecute their important design, by lengthening their days, and granting them convenient opportunities. It is God who hath preserved peace, and so much union for so many years."*

Which brings the story back to us. What gift do we have to add to the wave as it passes through our lives? How is God calling our generation to serve, to give of ourselves? I don't know the answer, but I'm pretty sure we're meant to begin with heartfelt gratitude. Justus Mitchell's words might as well have been directed at us. *"Let our hearts be alive with gratitude. When we recount God's deeds towards our land, and towards us as individuals, how can we refrain from giving thanks? Shall we not break forth into singing? Shall we not say praise him all ye saints: sing to his name?"* **Amen**