

Thanksgiving

Read Psalm 146

I want to talk about Praise. Praise is the way we affirm, "I am alive!" It is the way the human person celebrates. Celebrates what? Celebrates appreciation. Celebrates reverence. Celebrates thanks. I read the scripture, "Praise the Lord!" What is happening? I am celebrating the fact that I appreciate. I revere. I have awe for the significant meaning I have discovered hidden in the moment.

But by what process do we find that meaning? How do we find a new sense of the mystery implicit in our own existence? The Black scholar, Nathan Scott, says to a consuming age: You cannot consume all of human experience. If you begin to live deeply enough in the experiences you are having, even the negative ones, you will discover that when you get through consuming your anger and your response, there will be meaning left over. He calls it "surplussage" and it is that surplussage which tells you that there are depth dimensions here that you haven't probed. It underscores that you are more than you know. It points you beyond the level where you normally operate to a level that seems to intrude upon you, but that is actually grounded in you. Through it, you become aware of the transcendent principle that connects you with Life – that is larger than you at any given time. And therefore any event, even this event, is full of hidden meanings the implications of which go far beyond me talking to you at the Church For Today this morning. And it is that potential in the event that bespeaks the eternal quality of your existence. It is the awareness of the possibility in you which is the foundation of a deep appreciation that life is alive and that allows you to say, "Praise the Lord! Thanks be to God!"

Now, in reality, most of the time, people feel less than expectant about life – less grand, less significant. And life which, by definition, is a series of opportunities stretching out in front of us, has dried up, and the moments which make up the days have gone flat. They have lost their expectancy. Our moments

are stillborn. In the book entitled *The Diary of a Country Priest*, the priest comments on the people of his parish. He says there is boredom, a fierce boredom. He says it is like, 'useless kneading of bread in which there is hidden no yeast.' There is no mystery anymore. People have lost a sense of expectancy and the moments have gone dead.

My concern is that we are moving further and further away from experiencing moments of expectancy. The process I see in our society de-escalates the significance of the person, and escalates the significance of the system. What I see happening is that, in the last analysis, we feel limited. We feel we have limitations. And we end up feeling like we're glad to at least have what we have. And in the end, our sense of adventure, our sense of grandeur, is destroyed. And we are no longer able to celebrate who we really are.

In such a society where the sense of grandeur that people have available to their daily moments is reduced, because the options in life that seem apparent to them are reduced, you stab at religious consciousness at its core. If there is no awe about your own existence, there can be no foundation for praise. How can you have praise when you are not stricken with awe about the mystery of your own existence? There is no foundation for anything. There is therefore no foundation for religious life.

When the mystery about existence is stolen from you while you are just fighting to hang on, you lose the sense of what life can be. Therefore, there is no celebration, no praise, no thanks being given. Then in our churches and religious establishments, there is really no belief. And where there is no belief there can be no faith. Where there is no faith, there is no action, and where there is no action (and I will use a religious term here) there can be no redemption. Where there is no action, there can be no revolution. There can be no revolutionary action in history and there can be no redemptive action in time, if there is no faith. And that faith must be rooted in one's sense of awe. When awe is destroyed, the root of belief is destroyed – the foundation of faith is destroyed and people who

are under the pressure of these events draw smaller and smaller circles of definition for themselves.

In the Christian tradition, persons should draw larger and larger definitions of their own significance -- even eternal definitions -- as large as being children of God. We are meant to be open-ended, far-flung in definition, unending in possibility, precious beyond measurement.

How then out of this do we get Thanksgiving?

First of all, people can take hope in the fact that what they are experiencing does not have to be. And maybe they can begin to get a new picture of the moment and the possibilities of the next moment. We must argue with what we are looking at. We need to find ways to become participants again in our own lives. We are going to have to move from the beginning again, and we discover that those opportunities to participate are opportunities to begin to celebrate once again.

That is the foundation out of which Thanksgiving comes. It is to participate at such a level that we become awe-stricken with the Presence. It is to call forth God, whom we are concealing, in the absence which is visible in our presence. I can back that up another way and make it clearer. When you are present, it is apparent that there is absence. That sense of absence in your presence tells of something being concealed that is critical to your presence. It is the far-flung part of you that is waiting to be born again -- to free life in righteousness and justice and merciful action.

In this absence, God waits. And when you begin to celebrate your participation, that absence will become transcendence -- that is, transporting to persons who touch your presence. It will become a source of living, witnessing power.

The Psalmist says, "Praise the Lord." I would say, praise the Lord, and praise that which is inextricably structured into life. Praise that which the poet says structures life intricately with his own hand. Praise God. Praise the Presence. Praise the God, who in our own scripture, said, "I will put my life and my will clearly in them, and if they won't accept it on tablets, I will write it on the fleshy part of their own hearts, so they will know it for sure."

Praise the Lord, the Psalmist says. Praise the Lord. The Psalmist says, I will. And I am saying, that is our call this morning: to re-articulate our participation so that we can retouch again the well-springs of awe, which are the foundation of celebration – which precede faith, which is necessary for action.

The Psalmist says, I will praise the Lord as long as I live. I will praise God as long as I have strength, as long as there is life in me. One rendition says, as long as I have being; the other one says, as long as I live; another one says, as long as there is life in me; another one says as long as there is a word left in my mouth, the world will hear His name!

Praise the Lord! Hallelujah!