

How to Say “Grace” this Thanksgiving

A Sermon by

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Second Presbyterian Church
528 Garland Drive
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Worship: 8 & 10:30 a.m.
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How to Say “Grace” this Thanksgiving

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:4-7 NRSV

In a few days families across our nation – and in this great congregation -- will sit down at Thanksgiving dinner tables filled with mountains of delicious food. But before partaking, many of those families – especially those without a resident pastor -- will endure that awkward moment that comes when someone asks, “Who wants to say, grace?”

If you’ve ever been called on for the Thanksgiving prayer, you know it can be intimidating. You’re trying to get your thoughts together, everybody’s waiting for you to start, you don’t want to forget anything or anyone, the food’s starting to get cold, the kids are getting squirmy.

Maybe you can relate to one of my favorite movie scenes. It comes from “Meet the Parents.” Ben Stiller plays a young guy named Greg. He is desperately trying to impress his future in-laws at a meal at their house. Robert DeNiro plays his future father-in-law, and DeNiro takes great delight in putting Greg, who is Jewish, and a non-observant one at that, on the spot.

DeNiro: Greg, would you like to say grace? ...Unless you have some objection...

Stiller: No, no, no.I’d love to.OK, Oh...Dear God. Thank You. You are such a ...good...God to us; a kind and gentle, accommodating God. And we

thank you, oh sweet, sweet... Lord of Hosts for thesmorgasbord you have so aptly lain at our table this day...and each day...by day...Day by day. Oh, Dear Lord, three things we pray: To love Thee more dearly; to see Thee more clearly, to follow Thee more nearly day by day...by day. Amen.

DeNiro: "Thank you, Greg,... That was interesting."

Its funny when it happens to someone else, isn't it? But not when it happens to you. I've prayed prayers like that, gotten all tongue tied and self-conscious, and it's no fun. It can be tricky business praying out loud; especially in front of people who you are just getting to know or relatives you only see once a year.

This morning I want to offer some hints about how Christians might approach a Thanksgiving prayer. Ultimately, of course, today's message isn't about avoiding an awkward moment at Thanksgiving dinner; it's about giving voice to the gratitude we feel every day living in God's presence.

Thanksgiving prayers don't have to be complicated. Just focus on the basics.

Start with God. Faithful thanksgiving prayers point to *God* as the giver. I read a column in the *New Yorker* magazine years ago. It was written by a man – not one who would call himself a Christian -- who had attended a Thanksgiving dinner party in Manhattan. The hostess laid out a tremendous spread and the ten guests sat down around the crowded table. The hostess then suggested that before they ate they should go around the table taking turns mentioning a few things that they were thankful for that year. Well, each person went on at some length and they decided to start eating even as the lists of things they were thankful for kept getting longer and longer.

But what struck the man was that when all the lists were made something was still missing. There had been no mention of the "giver" of all these blessings. This man recognized that you can't give thanks without acknowledging the One *to whom* we are giving thanks: *God*. I've noticed the same trend as that man did: many people are eager to "give thanks," but they aren't always comfortable naming God as the one who deserves our thanks. But if not *God*, then whom are we really thanking at the table? Each other? Ourselves? Destiny? Typical prayers of thanksgiving are much more about the *gifts* than the *giver*; the best prayers, however, focus as much on *God* as on God's particular blessings.

One way to keep our focus where it should be is by remembering all three ways we experience God -- as our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

Most of us are quite comfortable thanking God the Creator, the maker of Legos and long-johns, sunsets and Snickers bars, friends and family. This past Wednesday the Kirk Night Kids made lists of things they are thankful to God for – everything from ants to ties to hash browns. We encouraged them to be playful and inclusive. Making lists like this – just like the ones at the

Manhattan dinner party – is a great way to work ourselves into an attitude of gratitude. Once you start it's hard to stop – and you don't want to.

These lists can form the beginning of a very meaningful kind of Thanksgiving reflection. Listen to how this poem stirs up in us gratitude for God's creation:

*At the beginning of time and space,
God gave us a world.*

*And God filled it with the useful—
with granite, with gravity, with grapes.*

*And God gave us minds and hands
to engineer the granite,
to probe the forces of gravity,
to squeeze the grapes.*

*At the beginning of time and space,
God gave us a world.*

*And God filled it with the beautiful—
with marble, with molds, with marigold.*

*And God gave us compassion and
imagination
to shape the marble into sculptures,
the molds into medicines,
the marigolds into tapestries of
yellow and bronze.*

*At the beginning of time and space,
God gave us a world.*

*And God filled it with the comic—
with croaking bullfrogs, with the buoyancy of
water, with duck-billed platypuses.*

*And God gave us, as image-bearers of God,
a sense of humor and different ways of
seeing in order to delight in the world.*

*At the beginning of time and space,
God gave us a world.*

*And he filled it with mystery—
with living cells and dying stars,
with black holes and the speed of light,
with human beings.*

*And God gave us dominion over the earth,
to till it and to nurture it with curiosity and creativity.*

At the beginning of time, God gave us a world.

From a liturgy created by

Kelloggsville Christian Reformed Church, Kentwood, Michigan

Faithful thanksgiving prayers begin with thanking God for every aspect of creation—nature, friends, family, laughter and love.

But they don't end there. That's because the created world is not God's only gift to us. Or, put another way, what would the Creation mean for us if we did not have a Redeemer? The beauty of a sunset can be appreciated only by people who are not anxious about their future. The taste of a thick, juicy steak (or vegetarian lasagna) is only appreciated by people who are not weighed down by guilt. The bonds of a lifelong friendship are only felt to the extent that we feel truly free. It doesn't matter how rich you are – or how many of God's blessings have passed through your life; if you are in a prison of your own making, you're poor. If you doubt me, ask convicted financier Bernie Madoff. He needs a Redeemer right now, someone who can get him out of the Hell he has made for himself by duping so many innocent investors.

The blessings of creation are only for this life. All our stuff is going to the trash heap or the recycling bin someday; we can't take it with us. If we want to enjoy anything in the *next* life, which will be much longer, then we need a redeemer. And we have one in Jesus Christ, thank God.

On Thanksgiving let's not forget what is obvious to us, but not to everyone: *because of what Jesus did we can look forward to a life after life.* God the Creator has given us a delightful *present*; God the Redeemer has given us a *future* filled with hope. It's our Redeemer's grace that allows us to say, "When every thing we *see* passes away, *we* will not pass away – at least not the eternal part of us." We call Thanksgiving dinner prayers, "saying grace." But often we forget to thank God for the grace that makes enjoyment of this life possible.

After we've thanked God for creating our world and redeeming us, our prayer is almost done. But before we say, Amen, we will want to thank God for sustaining us, too. That's the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit guides us, heals us, and speaks words of comfort to our hearts. The Spirit inspires us to greater heights of faithfulness. The Spirit makes us one with each other and our brother Jesus and God our Father. The Holy Spirit is the now presence of God.

We can't always see it while it's happening, but looking backward many of us can say, "Thank you, God, for carrying me through that time in my life." Theologians over the centuries have engaged in endless debates about how, exactly, the created world came to be. And they've spilled a lot of ink – and even some blood – in debates about how, exactly, God saves us. But what most of us care about on a day to day basis is what God does for us on a day to day basis: that's where the Holy Spirit, comes in. When we are weak, God's Spirit strengthens us. When we are tired, God's Spirit energizes us. When we are hungry and lost and lonely, God's Spirit sustains us.

Some of you know what it's like to need God's help just to get out of bed in the morning, to get dressed, and to get here to worship. But with God's help you made it. The Holy Spirit is God's answer to so many of our prayers. Sometimes the Holy Spirit is *all we have* to sustain us through heartache or illness or unemployment. Thank God, the Holy Spirit is *all we need*.

What are you thankful for this Thanksgiving? I hope your prayer of thanks points to God, the giver of all gifts, and includes all three ways God has blessed us: through creation, through salvation, and through sustaining us in the ups and downs of daily living. If we think about God in this way, then there's a good chance that we'll all be eager for the opportunity to say grace, not just on Thanksgiving, but every day. Amen.

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