

“Come Ye Thankful People, Come”

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
on November 22, 2020 – Thanksgiving Sunday
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
Text: Matthew 13:24-30

At the risk of stating the obvious, Thanksgiving will be different for all of us this year. The surging pandemic makes gathering even with close family members outside of our own households potentially dangerous, never mind traveling “over the river and through the woods to Grandma’s house” for a family Thanksgiving celebration we have all taken for granted over the years. At times in the past, I suspect all of us have resented the obligation of visits to family households for a meal that stretched out for the entire day. Appetizers with the in-laws followed by dinner with your own parents, the whole family crammed around the table. Then it was off to grandma’s for dessert and finally, if there was time, out for drinks with a few friends to commiserate over bloated bellies the adventures of the day just ended. It evolved into a comfortable if at times annoying family tradition, this Thanksgiving holiday. We love to complain about it – about the cooking, the traveling be it short or long distances, the endless debates about who makes the best cranberry sauce or the tastiest pie. The simple truth is, we have taken Thanksgiving for granted and now, this year, we can’t have it.

Yes, dear ones, this year we have lost Thanksgiving, having been forced to put it up on the imaginary shelves we have all constructed in this pandemic year to hold vacation trips not taken, family members not seen, milestone events not attended, dreams set aside or lost entirely as life went from mundane and ordinary on March 1 to completely blown apart as the month ended. And the worst part of this is that it *has* been going on since March. All those family visits, those long awaited vacations, those milestone events like weddings and graduations, even baby showers and bachelor parties – all gone up in smoke. No wonder we are feeling anxious and afraid, and even angry. All of those emotions come with this unfamiliar territory, dear ones. Surely we never asked to be here and we had hoped for a short stay when the pandemic began, but here we are with the pandemic only getting worse and relief efforts stymied by one person’s inexplicable

reluctance to accept the outcome of an election. Geesh, what a mess! It feels like we shouldn't even be having Thanksgiving on some level. What the heck is there to be thankful for anyway?

Quite a bit actually. But, in order to explore what we have to be thankful for, we must first set aside our anger and anxiety, right? Well, maybe not entirely. I know, I know – why would anyone be thankful for anger and anxiety? Perhaps because both of them are excellent indicators that we all know things are not as they should be. Life as we want it to be, as we expect it to be, as we have taken for granted for so long has just ground to a halt as we wait for someone to do something. We feel powerless for sure. But, I would suggest that in the anger, in that anxiousness, is a two-fold gift to each of us. First, the anger and anxiousness, justified as it is, comes from a deep acknowledgement that the lives we love, *and have taken for granted for so long*, are no longer something we can take for granted and I suspect for this generation they will never be taken for granted again. Second, the anger and anxiousness contain within it the seeds of the new beginnings which will come into being when this rollercoaster ride through pandemic and national crisis is at last behind us. Indeed, those seeds of new beginnings have already changed our lives in ways that have become our new reality, collectively and individually. Right here in the church, the pandemic has brought us kicking and screaming at times into the 21st century. We are now live-streaming worship each week! Us! Broadcasting weekly services! And people are watching them! More than ever would have come through our doors otherwise. And that's not all. We've finally taken the needed actions to make online giving possible, we've upgraded the technology for the church office and we've moved most of our governance meetings online to Zoom. And folks like it because meeting remotely opens up more doors for more people to become involved! Blessings abound in this strange new Covid reality, dear ones, and we would never have embraced them so completely were it not for the pandemic. That's just truth.

So, I think we can now perhaps begin to accept that there are blessings to be found in this new reality which has cost us so dearly in terms of lives upended and, sadly, even lost. And we haven't even really touched on all the blessings we routinely enumerate around the Thanksgiving table

every year – friends, family, food to eat, homes to shelter in, lives to live that still hold so much possibility for what we can do in spite of all there is we can't do. I must say, you have all taken my breath away as I have watched you dive into this new format for our beloved Christmas Bazaar. I'm sure by now you have all realized that this is a lot of work, as is the more traditional Bazaar format. And there are things we've been able to let go of – like the Tea and all the endless set-up and decorating. Fun to be sure, on some level at least, but still exhausting. And allow me to point out one fun fact for all of you regarding this year's Advent and Christmas season. For the first time since I've been here, and I suspect for perhaps the entirety of the church's life, you are NOT decorating the church for the people who come to the Bazaar. You are decorating the church for yourselves, and only yourselves. When next Sunday arrives, and Advent right along with it, the wreaths, the banners, the Christmas tree, the lights – it's all *for you* to enjoy, albeit virtually. It's all to remind *you* of this joyous celebration of the Savior's birth, and the beginning of a whole new year in the life of this amazing, miraculous church. That, to me, is tremendous gift and blessing for us all.

Our hymn for this day is a traditional one for Thanksgiving – “Come Ye Thankful People, Come.” That first verse especially – “Come, ye thankful people come, raise the song of harvest home; all is safely gathered in ere the winter storms begin” – paints a picture, in my mind at least, of that long ago first Thanksgiving when the beleaguered Pilgrims sat down to a meal with the indigenous peoples on whose land they were building a settlement. You can almost see the stormy seas, the lean-to barns filled with grain, the tables groaning beneath the weight of roasted birds and savory breads and puddings. It is truly the image of Thanksgiving we can sing together as we celebrate this most American of holidays, right? Except that's not why it was written and it is not an American hymn. This hymn was written by an Anglican pastor for his rural parish around 1848. The local farmers of his parish had experienced a particularly abundant harvest that year and, perhaps because they knew of the Great Irish Potato Famine happening at the same time, they felt a great need to hold a special worship service to give thanks to God for all that God had done for them in providing this miraculous harvest. Rev. Alford wrote this hymn for that

festival. It was soon picked for inclusion in other hymnals and quickly became a favorite hymn in the United Kingdom and the US. But, it was not ever a song about our Pilgrims and all they overcame to establish this country, and in turn, all this country has become to the people who have flocked here for new beginnings. Dear ones, put simply, this song was never about us. We assumed it was, but it wasn't and it never was. We made it that way. It was written for the people of a small church in a rural English village who just wanted God to know how grateful they were for God's bounteous gifts to them. (www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/history-of-hymns)

The hymn does have a specific Scripture reference contained within it in the second verse: "All the world is God's own field, fruit as praise to God we yield; Wheat and tares together sown are to joy or sorrow grown." This is a reference to the "parable of the wheat and tares" or "the parable of the weeds" in the Gospel of Matthew. Just to be clear, tares are a fancy word for weeds. This is not a parable we talk about very much because, frankly, it is based on an agricultural metaphor most of us in our urban world will not immediately connect to. Yet it is such an intriguing story to consider. In this parable, a man sows his field with good seed. But, as the plants begin to grow, his laborers realize that a bumper crop of weeds was also growing, mixed in with the desired crop. They went to the man and asked him first if he planted the weeds along with the good seed. No, he tells them, an enemy must have planted them. Then they ask him if he wants them to pull out the weeds immediately. He says no because in pulling out the weeds, they could damage the desired plants too. So, he tells them to wait until harvest time and pull the weeds out first, and then burn them. Then they can harvest the good plants. Huh? We think. What does this have to do with us, except maybe for the folks who work on the Pollinator Gardens?

First, let's realize that Jesus' audience when he first told this parable would immediately have understood his meaning. He wanted them to understand what God's kingdom would be like and this parable was part of series of parables along this same line of instruction. He is telling the people that the Master – God – is always planting good seed in the world – people that understand how they are to live their lives in accordance with God's will. However, God also understands that evil is still rampant in people who deny or refuse to accept God's vision of shalom, peaceful

co-existence, for all where everyone has enough – enough food, enough shelter, enough ways to earn a living and provide for their families. But, these evil forces whom the Master describes as enemies come in the night to sow the seeds of weeds among the healthy crops. These weeds will steal nutrients and water from the desired plants, perhaps even shielding them from the sunlight needed to grow. But, when asked if the weeds should be pulled now, the Master says no. He says to wait until the harvest time to gather them and then destroy them before harvesting the desired plants.

So, we get that God is the Master. But who are we in this parable? Are we the servants tending the field, the ones who recognize the weeds and want to eradicate them immediately? Possibly. Or, could we be the good plants, the ones whose very existence in the field is threatened by the weeds? Another possibility for sure. Or, and here's the tough question, are we the weeds that the Master allows to grow only to have them destroyed at the moment of harvest? Also a possibility, even though not a pleasant one. Alford gives us a hint as to how he answers this question in verse two: "Lord of harvest, grant that we wholesome grain and pure may be." *May* be. So, it would seem that our place in this parable is not given, and that I think, is Jesus' whole point in telling it. Will we be the laborers working to protect the crop? Will we be the good seed of the grain or the threatening seed of the weeds? And what is the desired crop anyway? That at least is easy to see. The good crop is God's kingdom – that place where shalom is the reality for everyone.

Important to note here is that in Alford's Anglican tradition, and in many other Christian traditions and churches, the kingdom of heaven refers to where we go after our death. In that interpretation of the parable, the meaning is clear. If you are a good person who follows God's way in life, you go to heaven. If you are a bad person, you go to the fires of hell. That, dear ones, is not our belief in the United Church of Christ. We believe that God's kingdom is here and now. That means that, in this parable, we can be the workers, the weeds and the good plants at different moments in our lives. Sometimes we are the laborers, working diligently to do what's right and just in our lives. But other times we are the weeds, giving in to those baser instincts that encourage us to ignore evil when we see it or worse, to think it's no big deal, when kindness gives way to expedience in any given

moment. Still other times we are the good plants, the ones destined to provide sustenance to all who are pursuing God's will in a world where that is not a high priority. What matters then, as we look for ourselves in this parable, is that we are willing to make a commitment to the Master , to God, to be who it is God needs us to be and then rely on God to help us do it.

In a very real way, then, we must continually decide who we are in God's grand scheme of shalom for the world in which we live. It is not a one and done decision. It is the work of a lifetime and the decision is one we make over and over again. Therefore, dear ones, on this strange Thanksgiving where nothing is as it has been and we do not know what it will be in the future, dare to give thanks for the journey of life each day. Dare to give thanks for decisions to be made, for opportunities to be recognized, for chances for renewal to be celebrated and pursued. Dear ones, dare to give thanks for yourselves – for all you have been and all you can become. Workers for God, good seed, weed seed. The choice is yours every day. Choose wisely always, remembering that Jesus is counting on you. Amen.