
Thanksgiving 2005

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The Buckhead Community Thanksgiving Service
Second Ponce de Leon Baptist Church**

I want to thank all of you for showing up tonight! I know we all have lots to do, and most of us were in our home churches this morning. I don't know about you, but in the Episcopal Church, it is service above and beyond the call of duty when you come to church twice in one day!

This gathering means something. Despite all the differences in our denominations, and even despite all the new occasions for antagonism that arise in our day and time, Christians can gather together for another reason. Christians can share something holy in common, a common thanksgiving to our common God.

Friends, that is a gift!

How many Christians does it take to change a light bulb? That depends upon your denomination.

If you're charismatic, it takes only one. Your hands are already in the air.

Pentecostals: Ten. One to change the bulb, and nine to pray against spirit of darkness.

Presbyterians: None. Lights will go on and off at predestined times.

Roman Catholic: None. Candles only.

Baptists: At least 15. One to change the light bulb, and three committees to approve the change and decide who brings the potato salad and fried chicken.

Episcopalians: Three. One to call the electrician, one to mix the drinks, and one to talk about how much better the old one was.

Mormons: Five. One man to change the bulb, and four wives to tell him how to do it.

Unitarians: We choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the need for a light bulb.

However, if in your own journey you have found that light bulbs work for you, that is fine. You are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your light bulb for the next Sunday service in which we will explore a number of light bulb traditions, including: incandescent, fluorescent three way, long-life and tinted, all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence.

Methodists: Undetermined. Whether your light is bright, dull, or completely out, you are loved. You can be a light bulb, turnip bulb, or tulip bulb. Church-wide lighting service is planned for Sunday. Bring bulb of your choice and a covered dish.

Lutherans: None. Lutherans don't believe in change.

Finally, the Amish: What's a light bulb?

Yes, we all have our ways of changing a light bulb, or lighting the room, or lighting the world with the light of Christ. We all have our ways, and they are good and healthy ways.

Tonight, I want to talk about our common harvest.

I liked the first reading we heard tonight, from Paul's joyous letter to the Philippians. What a rejoicing book that is. Reading that book itself is a good Thanksgiving exercise. At the outset, Paul gives thanks for his every remembrance for the church, and then he prays that they will produce a harvest. In fact, a harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

During this week of Thanksgiving, we will give thanks for much. But the question I also want us to ask is this one:

What are you harvesting in your life?

The odds are that you are harvesting what you have sown. The Book of Job was right: "As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same" (Job 4.8). Galatians 6.8 says we reap whatever we sow. What kind of spiritual fruit are you harvesting at this lovely autumn time of the year. I heard someone say the other day: God wants us spiritual fruit, not religious nuts.

If we sow good news, then we will harvest good news. If we plant bad news, then we will harvest bad news. Basically, there are two kinds of people in the world. There are those who wake up and say, "Good morning, Lord," and then there are those who wake up and say, "Good Lord, it's morning."

How we respond to common weather can be a measure of what we are planting in the world. The weather is an established fact, and nothing we can do will change it. There are those who complain about the weather and those who give thanks for it. W.H. Auden, the poet, said this:

"weather

Is what nasty people are

Nasty about, and the nice

Show a common joy in observing."

That joy produces a harvest of joy. Giving thanks to God, for all things, produces a harvest of thanksgiving.

A rabbi was opening his mail one morning. Taking a single sheet of paper from an envelope he found written on it only one word: "shmuck." At the next Friday night service, the Rabbi announced, "I have known many people who have written letters and forgot to sign their names, but this week I received a letter from someone who signed his name.... and forgot to write a letter.

What kinds of letters are we writing to God? Are they letters of complaint? Are they letters of thanksgiving?

Churches, and synagogues and mosques, too, for that matter, are great places to measure the seeds that people are planting. Consider what it is that most of us hear at churches. There are some folks who rejoice in the good. They take seriously that great verse in Philippians 4:

"Beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Philippians 4.8). Indeed, speak on these things!

But you and I know that churches are sometimes the places where people act their worst, where they say the worst things. What if we decided to sow good news in our churches?

Somebody once made out a list of the ten things you never hear in church.

1. Hey! It's my turn to sit in the front pew.
2. I was so enthralled, I never noticed your sermon went 25 minutes over time.
3. Personally I find witnessing much more enjoyable than golf.
4. I've decided to give our church the \$500 a month I used to send to TV evangelists.
5. I volunteer to be the permanent teacher for the Journey to Adulthood class
6. Forget the denominational minimum salary, let's pay our Rector so he can live like we do.
7. I love it when we sing hymns I've never heard before!

8. Since we're all here, let's start the service early.
9. Father, we'd like to send you to this Bible seminar in the Bahamas.
10. Nothing inspires me and strengthens my commitment like our annual stewardship campaign!

But what if we began saying things like that? Then, we would also begin harvesting joy, harvesting good news, harvesting righteousness.

There is always something around our world that is worth complaining about. If we want to be complainers this week, we will find something. The meal did not work. The travel is too burdensome. Uncle so-and-so is a bore. Aunt so-and-so drives me crazy. My brother always acts that way.

But we have a choice how to respond to those incidents. We can choose to plant good news, or we can choose to plant bad news.

The young fool walked into the doctor's office and said that her body hurt wherever she touched it.

"Impossible!" says the doctor. "Show me."

So she takes her finger, pushes on her elbow and screams, then she pushes her left breast and screams in even more agony. She pushes her knee and screams; likewise she pushes her ankle and screams. Everywhere she touches makes her scream.

The doctor says, "Ah, I've got it. Your finger is broken."

Usually, it's not the folks around us who are the problem. It's not the world around us who are the problem. It's us. It's our finger that is broken. It's our tongue that is poisoned. It's our eyesight that is blind.

There is a harvest of righteousness out there in the world, but that harvest needs our seeds of hope. That harvest needs our careful tending and blessing. That harvest needs our good words.

This Thanksgiving, then, I give thanks for those who speak good in the world. Those who refuse to submit to complaint and degradation, those who refuse to speak ill of their neighbor in favor of something good.

There's an old religious tradition that whenever we give thanks for someone, we are actually blessing them. And, vice versa. To bless someone is to give thanks for them.

I hope that this week, we gave thanks -- not just for material assets, for safe weather, for ripe harvest, for all the things around Thanksgiving which we remember - but for people, as well.

When we bless one another, God's grace abounds. God lives in our blessings. God lives when we speak good words to one another.

I love it that Thanksgiving always occurs around the First Sunday of Advent. We spend a week giving thanks, and then we begin to celebrate the coming of Christ. Advent means "coming." Advent means that Jesus is coming.

Some folks prepare for the coming of Jesus with fear. Be careful that you are not left behind, some say! Some folks prepare for the coming of Jesus with threatening words.

I prefer to pair Advent with Thanksgiving. The coming of Jesus is always a good thing, meant to be described with good words.

No matter how dark the war, there are good words to speak. No matter how tough the year, there are good words to speak. No matter how fearful the future, there are good words to speak.

I know that God comes in judgment. But the judgment of God is always good, because it is always true. And the judgment of God always brings good out of bad.

It is God who is ultimately in charge of the harvest. It is God who speaks the words that produce the real harvest, and God's word is grace. God's grace, and only God's grace, produces the harvest of righteousness. God speaks good words, even in the most uncertain times.

Let us prepare for the coming of Christ by speaking such good words. Let us bless the Lord, and let us bless one another, with good words, too.

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