
Good Words To You

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The First Sunday of Advent**

It was the Sunday before Thanksgiving, and an older man and his wife were sitting together in their home. They had gone through a lot together. He picked up the phone and called his daughter up in North Carolina. "Honey," he said, "I've got some bad news. After all these years, your mother and I have decided to get a divorce."

"What!" the daughter exclaimed, "Hold on. You can't do that. Have you told my brother?" "No," the old man said, "I wanted to call you first."

"Well, let me call him first" the daughter said, "I'll call you right back."

A few minutes later, she called back. "Okay," she said, "I don't want you and Mom to do a thing. Wait for us. My brother and I are getting tickets, and we're flying down there on Tuesday. Wait for us." She hung up.

The old man turned to his wife and said, "It worked! The kids are coming home for Thanksgiving, and they're paying their own way!"

I pray that everyone had a blessed and fruitful and full Thanksgiving observance this year. Thanksgiving is a blessed day for this country, a religious kind of day that crossed religious boundaries. No matter what our creed or denomination, every religious person speaks thanks, don't they?

To me, Thanksgiving means speaking good words. Thanksgiving is a time to remember blessings, and then to bless people.

"Good words to you." I like that phrase. A good man, or a good woman, is hard to find, we say. But I believe good words are hard to find, too. Good words are hard to find. Thanksgiving should be a season of good words.

We do not always hear good words in the office break room. We do not always hear them in carpool lines, on our radios, in our newspapers or in our weekly news magazines. We do not always hear good words at the dinner table, in our memos and reports, in the bed before we fall asleep.

What's worse is when we are actually more eager to hear bad words than we are to hear good words. Alice Roosevelt Longworth is reported to have said, "If you haven't got anything nice to say about anybody, come sit next to me."

It's amazing how fast bad words travels compared to good words. Winston Churchill declared, "A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on."

Good words are true words, but they are words of blessing. And good words are here. Good words are among us, if we have ears to hear.

In the times of our ancestors, the most important thing we could pass on to each other, from generation to generation, was not wealth. When a person died, the most important thing he or she left to the children was not land, not the house, not the family jewels.

The most important things a person left to his offspring were good words. Folks called these good words, "blessings."

In Greek, The root meaning of the word for blessing is "good word." A blessing is a good word.

When a man died back in our patriarchal societies, his most important asset was his blessing. So the children scrambled about, not for his wealth, but for his blessing.

The famous story of Jacob and Esau, the twin brothers of Isaac always fighting and deceiving one another, is a story about who will receive their dying father's blessing. Later, when Joseph dies, he refuses to leave his blessing with the oldest son; but he leaves it with Joseph.

I believe our children are still scrambling about for blessing. It may look like they are scrambling for something else. The culture says it's bling they are scrambling for. But that's not it. What all of us want, at root, is not bling. It's blessing.

Consider the father telling his son, "You were great out on that field today. You passed that ball, you made that block, you defended that goal in a spectacular way." That is the way of blessing.

Consider a mother telling her daughter, "You were great on that field today. You passed that ball, you made that block, you defended that goal in a spectacular way." That is the way of blessing.

The way of blessing finds a route even when the situation is most awkward.

I remembered this Thanksgiving one of my grandmothers, a woman of sweet spirit and careful words. She taught me once about the power of discretion. She taught me once that no matter how awkward the situation, there are good words to say.

The time was over thirty years ago. My cousin, a girl from North Carolina was to visit Atlanta, and my grandmother invited me to help entertain her here in the big city of Atlanta. "OK," I said, "just let me know where y'all want to go, and I'm in." So my grandmother called back in a few days and said, "Sambo, Elizabeth wants to go to the Fox Theater for the performance that night."

"Great," I said, "who is performing?" "Well," she said, "it's some person named George Carlin. I don't really know who he is."

Well, at about eighteen years old, I certainly knew who George Carlin was. He was making news by talking about the seven dirty words that the FCC would not allow on television. I'm sure none of you ever heard of him, and I'm sure none of you know any of the words.

Actually, I do not think my cousin Elizabeth knew what we were getting into, either. To my regret, I did not say anything. I ended up sitting there in the Fox Theater between my grandmother and my cousin listening to quite an analysis of the seven dirty words. I dared not laugh.

But my grandmother, my dear grandmother, was at her discreet best. She may have been one of the sweetest souls I have ever known. She knew how to speak good words.

When things could not have got any worse, she leaned over to me to say something. I cautiously leaned back. "Sambo, can you hear anything he is saying? I can't hear a word he is saying."

Even in the most awkward moments, there are still good words to say. There are still blessings to give. I want to learn from my ancestors who knew how to bless.

When we gathered around the table on Thanksgiving Day, many of us held hands and said something. Some of us called it

the Blessing. Some of us called it Grace. Some of us called it Giving thanks.

In one family, a wife invited some people to dinner. At the table, she turned to their six-year-old daughter and said, "Would you like to say the blessing?"

"I wouldn't know what to say," the girl replied.

"Just say what you hear Mommy say," the wife answered.

The daughter bowed her head and said, "Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people to dinner?"

Our children imitate us. If they hear us bless, then they will bless. If they hear us curse, then they will curse.

It's interesting, though, that we use these different words to describe the same act of blessing at the dinner table. We bless, we give thanks, we say grace.

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. The God I choose is the God of Isaiah, who spoke good words about the coming majesty of God. The good word of the Lord is the voice that compels people to beat swords into plowshares, to turn spears into pruning hooks.

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. God speaks good words, even in the most uncertain times.

God prepares 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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