

***“Something In Religion To Which I Am a Stranger...”***  
A Thanksgiving Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick

There’s an interesting story told about John Wesley who, along with his brother Charles, is credited with founding the Methodist movement. When he was a student at Lincoln College in Oxford, a porter knocked on his door one evening and asked to speak with him. After some conversation Wesley noted the man's thin coat, for it was a cold winter night. Wesley suggested that he had better get another coat. The porter replied: "This coat ... is the only coat I have in the world and I thank God for it."

Wesley asked the man if he had eaten and the porter replied: "I have had nothing today but a draught of spring water ... and I thank God for that."

Wesley, growing uneasy in the man's presence, reminded him that he would have to get to his quarters soon or be locked out. "Then what shall you have to thank God for?" Wesley asked.

"I will thank Him," replied the porter, "that I have dry stones to lie upon."

Wesley was deeply moved by the man's sincerity and he said to him, "You thank God when you have nothing to wear... nothing to eat... [and] no bed to lie on. I cannot see what you have to thank God for."

The man replied: "I thank God... that he has given me life and being, and a heart to love Him, and a desire to serve Him." (8-9)

After the man had left with a coat from Wesley's closet, some money for food and words of appreciation for the witness he had made, Wesley wrote in his Journal: "I shall never forget that porter. He convinced me there is something in religion to which I am a stranger." (John Reynolds' Anecdotes of the Rev. John Wesley (1828))

*Something in religion to which I am a stranger.* Obviously, John Wesley was sensing that he somehow was missing the spirit of thanksgiving. To be so poor and yet so humble... to have nothing and yet to be thankful to God for the very gift of life itself no matter how much or how little it offered... well, it was an inspiration to this great theologian and a challenge to the integrity of his faith.

This morning we come to worship with an attitude of gratitude... at least that’s what we hope to experience. For the Thanksgiving holiday is upon us and this is one of our opportunities to stand in the presence of God giving expression to our blessings. And to focus our thinking, I’ve chosen one of the classic Biblical expressions of gratitude... the 100<sup>th</sup> Psalm. In fact, it is called *A Psalm of Thanksgiving!*

In this brief psalm, the writer (most probably David) sheds light upon two qualities one might hold close when bringing thanks before the Lord. There are others to be sure, but these two come front and center for me. First, he seems to suggest that we are children of God and our gratitude should embrace a sense of enthusiastic joy as we move into the presence of God! And more to the point, this is an appreciation that knows no bounds.

All of us... indeed, human beings around the world are the handiwork of the Creator – **It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture** – and we are encouraged to be joyfully grateful before the Lord – **Make a joyful noise to the Lord... worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.** This is the theme of the day as we move into the advent season. We are called to be a joyful people. From the least of us to the greatest among us, we worship God as our friend with glad, indebted hearts.

As I was reading through a volume on the psalms in *The Daily Study Bible Series* this week, I learned something very interesting (Knight, George A. *Psalms: Volume 2: The Daily Study Bible Series*. The Westminster Press: Philadelphia, 1983. Pg. 124). When David is writing about coming into the presence of God with a joyful spirit and thankful heart, he is speaking of an intimate relationship. The word *presence* in this psalm is actually derived from the Hebrew word for “face”. I recognize you by looking into your face and when I know you well, I can sense your spirit. So it is with our God. As we slip into his presence we are not approaching a distant deity but a very personal God whom we know and experience at a warm and cherished level and a God who knows us and can read the authenticity of our joy in our face. Isn’t that a beautiful image.

To illustrate what I’m talking about, let me share a wonderful conversation I had with my granddaughter a couple months ago. Julia doesn’t talk on the phone very often. I don’t think she has quite figured how that voice is coming through the receiver and it spooks her a little. Yet when she does choose to talk, Paula and I cherish the exchange. And that happened a couple months ago. In fact, she was so excited that she couldn’t wait to talk. I remember so clearly... it was a Saturday afternoon.

“Pops,” she asked me as soon as she picked up the phone, “have you ever had cows in your yard?”

“Well no, Julia, I haven’t. Have you?”

“Oh yes,” she said. “We had cows in our yard this morning.”

“Wow! Tell me about them. Where did they come from?”

“They were just walking down the street and they came to visit us.”

Okay, now I’m catching on. Julia’s imagination was taking over so I played along.

“How many cows were there?”

“There were five, Pops.”

“And what color were they, sweetheart?”

“They had brown spots.”

“And what did they do?”

“They just came and walked around in our yard.”

“And what did you do?”

“I ran and woke up daddy.”

“I’ll bet daddy was surprised.”

“Yes, he was. He’s never seen cows in the yard before.”

“So what happened then?”

“Well, me and daddy chased the cows.”

“You chased the cows. How come?”

“Daddy didn’t want them to eat the garden.”

“I see.”

“Then they walked down the path to the pond and one of them got a drink.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. And then they went to the house next door.”

“And what did they do there,” I asked.

“Nothing, they just ate the grass then they walked down the path to the street.”

“What did they do then?”

“They just walked down the street and I couldn’t see them anymore.”

What a great conversation. Julia was so excited and enthusiastic. She couldn’t make up the story fast enough. And then when she finished her tale she quickly said, “Okay Pops, I’m going now,” and she gave the phone to my son. I was laughing as he came on the other end and commented upon our little one’s active imagination. Andy was laughing too as he said, “Oh no

dad... she didn't make it up. We really did have cows in our yard this morning and I have no idea where they came from. Nobody around here has cows."

As I thought about that conversation, it struck me that it's a little like what the psalmist was describing. I am a child of God and I come to God with enthusiasm as my life unfolds, surprised by the unexpected moments which catch my attention. And I speak to a God I can't really see with the full conviction that He is there listening to and hanging on my every word. It's an intimate moment of connection and the Heavenly Father is filled with pride and pleasure over the joy of his child. This is the first step of expressing our gratitude to God.

Then there is a second lesson I take from this psalm. I believe David is saying our gratitude calls upon us to recognize God as the source of our good fortune. **Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name.** How often do we take this directive seriously? When we approach our Lord in worship, our joy should issue itself in thanksgiving and praise. It is simply a part of being gathered in the community of faith.

In the early church, every time the people gathered they celebrated the Eucharist. Why did they do that? First it was an opportunity to remember what Jesus did for them through the cross, and secondly it was a chance to say "thank you" because this is precisely what the term "Eucharist" means... *give thanks*. Especially during this season of gratitude we should with great intention and desire pause to enthusiastically lift our gratitude before the Lord for the blessings we have received.

Eugene Peterson wrote about a young man named Johnny Bergman who happened to be a member of his congregation. Johnny was a young man and when he and his wife were first married they were enthusiastic participants. But then the weeds of worldly care choked their young faith. They acquired children; they became suddenly wealthy and their lives filled up with boats and cars, house-building and social engagements. They were in worship less and less frequently and then not at all. (But then) after a two-year absence, on a bright winter Epiphany Sunday, Johnny was there again. Surprised to see him, (Peterson) said, "Johnny! What brought you to worship today?" He said, "I woke this morning feeling so good, so blessed, so alive -- so created -- I just had to say thank you, and this is the only place I could think of to say it adequately. I wanted to say it to Jesus." (Eugene H. Peterson, "Birthing," *Christian Century*, January 6-13, 1999, 27)

So there you have it... two simple principles born out of the old hundredth psalm...

*We are children of God and our gratitude should embrace a sense of enthusiastic joy as we move into the presence of God!*

*Our gratitude calls upon us to recognize God as the source of our good fortune.*

So on this note as we close, I leave you with a quiet thought... God has two dwellings; one in heaven, and the other in a meek and thankful heart (Izaak Walton). This week may we all find some way to let the Lord of every good and perfect gift know that our arms are outstretched in an effort to joyfully welcome him home. Amen and AMEN!