

"A JOYFUL NOISE"
November 19, 1989

TEXT: Psalm 100:1 "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth."

Once again we come to the time of year we call Thanksgiving. I say "call Thanksgiving" because any resemblance between what we do and real thanksgiving seems almost co-incidental. Consider, for instance the time of year. At one time it may have made sense to celebrate Thanksgiving after the fall harvest, but today very few Americans have any real relationship to agriculture.

Millions of city dwellers have never even seen a farm, and even farmers do not always relate to a fall harvest. For the Kansas wheat farmer early July would be a much more meaningful time. And for most city dwellers some time after the end of the year might be more appropriate. After all, that is when we bring our records up to date, though the thought of filing and paying our income tax might dampen the celebration a little. The fact remains, however, that, for most of us, late November is a pretty artificial time for giving thanks.

And, then, consider the celebration, itself. For most of us the pattern will probably be pretty similar. Some will go away to visit family, while others have family coming to them. Many will spend a good part of the day watching TV, not that this has anything to do with giving thanks. The parades remind us that, for the merchant, "thanksgiving" follows a good Christmas season. And the football games entertain, but make us thankful only if our team wins. And, of course, there will be lots of eating. I am sure we all look forward to traditional Thanksgiving menus, but, once the table grace is said, if it is said at all, conscious thoughts of thanks will almost surely fade away.

All in all, we shall probably spend several hours talking and/or watching television, several more preparing and eating food, often more than is good for us, and perhaps ten or fifteen seconds of rather stereotyped table grace. This is the once a year thanks-giving of the most richly blessed people in all history. Somehow, I just do not think God is much impressed.

Could it be that Thanksgiving Day is so thoroughly secular because, at heart, we are not a very thankful people? Have we turned the Pilgrim's humble Thanksgiving into a day when we congratulate ourselves for our many blessings. Do we, like little Jack Horner, sit in our comfortable corner of the world eating our pumpkin pie and thinking "Oh, what a good boy am I"?

Agricultural people are almost always grateful. To them, the hymn we just sang is more than just words. They know they only "plow the fields and scatter." And they know, too, that, if that seed grows, it is only because it is "fed and watered by God's almighty hand." No wonder they sing, "All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above, Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all His love."

But urban, industrial folk may be more inclined to thank the company's marketing division, or the union negotiating team, or the government's economic planners. And, if we are grateful to God at all, it may only be in short spurts, like today on the Sunday before Thanksgiving or next Thursday on Thanksgiving Day. Most of the time, however, we seem to accept the most incredible blessings without batting an eye or showing the slightest appreciation.

Perhaps God will have to find some way to bring us back to reality. We are warned in the eighth chapter of Deuteronomy: "Take heed lest you forget the Lord, your God . . . lest when you have eaten and are full and have built goodly houses and live in them . . . and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up and you forget the Lord, your God . . . Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.' . . . And if you forget the Lord, your God . . . I solemnly warn you this day that you shall surely perish."

But what if we are thankful? What if we have merely fallen into bad habits when it comes to expressing it? In that case, God has provided us with the antidote. It is found in a very familiar portion of scripture, one which those my age or older probably memorized in Sunday School. It is Psalm 100 which says:

"Make a joyful noise unto the Lord all ye lands. Serve the Lord with gladness; come before His presence with singing. Know ye that the Lord, He is God. It is He that hath made us and not we ourselves. We are His people and the sheep of His pasture. Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise. Be thankful unto Him and bless His name. For the Lord is good; His mercy is everlasting, and His truth endureth to all generations."

First of all, let us note the recognition that God is the source of all our blessings. "It is He that hath made us and not we ourselves." It is God who not only gave us life, but who made us what we are, who gave us the blessings we enjoy. We may think that we have earned them, ourselves. But how, with talents and abilities which are themselves God's gifts. There is no such thing as a self-made man. All that we are, or ever can be, we owe to God.

Secondly, according to this psalm, real thanksgiving has a public quality. "Enter into His gates with thanksgiving and into His courts with praise." When we are really grateful, we are publicly grateful. Think of how we act when a baby is born, or when a war is over, or when an election is won, or when our favorite team wins a close game against a highly favored opponent. It is fine to have private thoughts of gratitude, but unless we give them some kind of public expression, I wonder just how grateful we really are.

In over 180 places the book of Psalms speaks of thanksgiving and praise. And the Hebrew words it uses include "halal", which originally meant to celebrate; "zahmar", which means to make music; "yahdah", which means to stretch out one's hands; and "shabah", which means to address in a loud voice. All of them refer to public acts of celebration in a kind of joyous abandon. When we are truly grateful, we not only say it, we show it. Perhaps you can remember a time when you gave someone a present or did something nice for them and they said, "Thank you" in a kind of monotone which made you question whether or not they really meant it? I wonder if God does not sometimes feel that way about us.

But, most of all, real thanks-giving involves a giving of oneself. The psalmist says, "Serve the Lord with gladness." And St. Paul adds, "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." (Romans 12:1) Or, as my mother often used to say, "It's easy to say, 'Thank you.' If you really mean it, then show it by the way you act."

I suspect that most of you came to church this morning, at least in part, because you wanted to show your gratitude to God. If you offered God your best when you made out your 1990 pledge card, I believe you did so because you wanted to say "Thank you" to God in some kind of meaningful way. Well, I am happy to say that, because you did, with ninety per cent of the pledges in, our pledge base is running fourteen per cent ahead of last year. And every time we offer some service or some activity it will be your "Thank you" that made it possible.

I believe, too, that these men and women behind me, who Sunday after Sunday sing God's praise and add so much to our worship also do so because they want to do more than just say, "Thank you." They are grateful enough for God's blessings that they want to "serve the Lord with gladness." So are our greeters, and our ushers, and our acolytes, and our Sunday School teachers, and every one who brought a Thanksgiving offering -- whether it was food or money. So are those who prepare and serve meals for the hungry people at St. Vincent or volunteer at the Congregational Home, or spend time teaching someone to read, or serve on the Board of Goodwill Industries, or the Salvation Army, or the Milwaukee Hearing Society.

These are just a few of the ways in which members of this church "serve the Lord with gladness." So many ways that no one could possibly do them all. But truly grateful people will do some of them. Even those who are bed-ridden can pray for God's Kingdom and for those who seek to serve it. In church, at school, at work, in volunteer services, truly grateful people do more than just say "Thank you." If we remember that it is God, who gives us power to get wealth, then surely we will want to do something. We will want to "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord." We will want to "serve the Lord with gladness." For the Lord is good; His mercy is everlasting, and His truth endureth to all generations."