

## From Thanksgiving to Service©

November 24, 2013

Philippians 1:1-11; Matthew 25:31-40

Rev. Sharlyn Gates

***\*\*Note: Much of this sermon comes from the 2013 resource for the Presbyterian Women's Thank Offering service. I used the written meditation and some of my own writing was added. You can find the resources at:***

<http://www.pcusa.org/resource/2013-thank-offering-promo-packet/>

Today's worship service, including some of this message, is taken from the Presbyterian Women's Thank Offering and Praise Service resources. As you may know, we are reorganizing our Presbyterian Women's group here at Holly Presbyterian Church.

One of the traditions of Presbyterian Women is to receive the Thank Offering – either among the women's group or within the whole church. All of the women's groups I have been involved with have done it within the worship service of the gathered community, as we are doing today.

You can see by the insert that the Thank Offering has been taken since the late 1800's and reading on you will see how much it has helped in so many areas, including saving the worldwide missionary movement of our denomination at one time!

The Thank Offering goes to programs that provide education, safe housing, clean water, health care, help for prisoners, justice for women, and promotes and celebrates 36 life-changing projects that have already been funded by the previous year's giving.

If you look back at our call to worship for this morning, taken from the words of Mary's song, you can see that even before he was born, Mary was aware that her son Jesus would have what theologians call "a bias for the poor."

He would love the poor who would be lifted up and have their hunger satisfied with good things. God promised this to all generations, forever.

The gospel of Matthew was recorded almost two thousand years ago, in a country half a world away, yet it sounds contemporary. Notice the social issues Jesus raises as he speaks with his disciples near the end of his earthly life.

Every one of those needs is still with us. Jesus is concerned about those who are hungry, who lack good drinking water, who are strangers in the land, who need clothing, who require health care and who are confined to prison.

Jesus commends to his disciples the needs of people in these circumstances and makes it clear that in caring for "the least of these," the disciples will be caring for him.

Two thousand years later and the gospel still rings true. Jesus still expects us to feed the hungry, offer a cup of water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, provide clothing, provide medical care and visit to prisoners.

If you say, "I can't do all those things. I don't have enough resources to tackle even one of those huge issues in our society," you're right. Of course, by yourself, you can't and don't. But when Presbyterian men and women pool resources by giving to special offerings like this morning's Thank Offering, we can make a big difference.

Look at the projects funded by this year's Thank Offering. They include a food pantry that specializes in food for a Hispanic community, a well that provides fresh water at a children's home in Kenya, new immigrant services in Connecticut that welcome the stranger, washers and dryers for a homeless shelter so residents can have clean clothes, a mobile dental clinic in Jamaica, and reentry programs for women who are released from prison. Each of these projects addresses at least one of the needs Jesus raised so many years ago.

Of course the range of needs has expanded since Jesus' day. This year's Thank Offering also provides grants for 30 other projects ranging from issues of domestic violence to mental health care and building renovations. Each and every dollar dedicated extends a figurative "cup of cold water" given in Jesus' name to one of the least of these.

Jesus' bias for the least of these began before his birth and continued until his death on the cross. Remember how he spoke graciously to one of the prisoners executed with him? He assured him by saying, 'On this day, you will be with me in Paradise.'

In fact our scripture points to a time in the distant future when Christ will return to earth in all his glory. At that time he will assess how well we have lived up to his expectations and how we have carried on his care for the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick and the prisoners.

It is our fervent hope that Jesus will be able to look at the work of Presbyterians and say, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you."

This week we will gather around the table with family or friends – at least I hope that you will all have someone to be at table with – and we will give thanks. We get to have an entire day dedicated to being thankful and celebrating our thankfulness by eating lots of food!

Our family used to always go to my grandmother's house where we enjoyed a very big table loaded with turkey and pheasant and all the things that go with it, including, of course, pumpkin pie.

Back then, my grandmother had little name cards at each of our places where we were to sit. But besides our name, there was a different psalm of thanksgiving on each card and before we ever got to eat – before the prayer, even – we had to go around the very large table and each person had to read their psalm.

It took a while, and I confess I was impatient most of the time, looking at and smelling all the food, but that act of giving thanks stands out in my mind still today. Being at the table with my large family and remembering what the day was really about was such a blessing that has lived on in me all my life.

This year, my daughter, Annie and her family will come to our house and we will sit at the table and in some way share what we are thankful for and give thanks before digging in and enjoying the food. The large extended family won't be there because of the miles between us, but I am thankful to be able to share it with some family.

The thing is, most of us are aware of someone who is alone or someone who is estranged from family; we know of people who have nothing, who are striving to just be able to eat something. We know there are people sitting alone in prisons, there are people who are sick, and afraid, who are in grief.

As we give to the Thank Offering this morning and as we look forward to the wonderful holiday of Thanksgiving, I invite you to truly give thanks for your many blessings – and to be a blessing in someone else's life.

To God be the glory. Amen.

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