

Thanksgiving First

In English by Rev. Dr. James Moos, Guest Preacher

Translated by Virginia Sung

(Rev. Moos is Executive Minister for UCC's Wider Church Ministries and
Co-Executive of UCC/DOC's Global Ministries

For Berkeley Chinese Community Church – All Church Bilingual Thanksgiving Worship
November 18, 2018 • 26th Sunday after Pentecost • 11 am

John 6:1-14

¹ After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. ² A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ³ Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴ Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵ When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?' ⁶ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷ Philip answered him, 'Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.' ⁸ One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ⁹ 'There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?' ¹⁰ Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down.' Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹ Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹² When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.' ¹³ So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴ When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.'

* * * * *

On Thursday many of us will sit down to our Thanksgiving dinners and before we take the first bite, we will give thanks. We will thank God for the meal before we eat it, not afterwards. That's the reverse of how we normally do things, because usually we give thanks after we've received something good.

That's what happens when we give and receive gifts. Friday is the first official day of the holiday shopping season; people will be going to stores and shopping malls in large numbers. Most of us know that we'll receive Christmas presents from certain people, but none of us will go to them on Friday and say, "I want to thank you in advance for the wonderful Christmas gift I know you're planning on getting me." That would be manipulative, it would send a message that they better get us something special or else. No, we wait until we've actually received the gift before we thank others for their thoughtfulness.

In virtually every area of life, we give thanks only after we've received a good thing, not before. I often thank members of our Global Ministries staff for their good work, but I thank them after they've completed a job. There's no need to show gratitude before they've done something. Before they take on a project I offer encouragement, I thank them after it's successfully completed.

But on Thursday my wife and I will sit down with friends to a traditional Thanksgiving dinner and before we eat, we will give God thanks. Before we know if the turkey is properly cooked, before

we've tasted to see if we like the gravy, before we know if the pumpkin pie has the proper spices--before any of that, we will give thanks. Why? Why give thanks before we've received the blessing?

In our gospel lesson from John, we read the familiar story of the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus was traveling near the Sea of Galilee, and a huge crowd followed him. The other gospels tell us that it was getting late in the day, around suppertime, and the people were hungry; they wanted something to eat. The trouble was that they'd already wandered too far to make it practical to go back home for a meal, so where would the food come from?

Sure, we already know how the story turned out, but what if we didn't know? Can we imagine ourselves in the midst of that hungry crowd? Or, better yet, what if we'd been among the disciples, because Jesus asked them where the food would come from. Jesus asked Philip, "Philip, where are we going to get enough food to feed everybody?"

Poor Philip, how did he know where the food was to come from, what could he do? The Bible says that there were 5,000 men in the crowd that day, women and children would surely have brought the total to 15,000 or more. There was immense need and until needs get met, there's nothing to give thanks for.

We also live in a world of immense need. I'm here today in my capacity as Co-Executive of Global Ministries, the joint mission agency of the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Global Ministries works with about 300 partners in 80 countries around the world. It's been my privilege to travel the world, and I've seen the immense need.

To give one example, there's the Elim Orphanage located in Henan Province, China. Elim cares for dozens of children, providing them with nutritious food, and education and love. But they had a serious problem—there was no safe, clean drinking water for the children. The Xiaohong River runs behind the orphanage, but it's badly polluted. So they dug a 100 ft. deep well hoping to get good water, but they discovered that it was polluted. So they dug another well, this time it was 500 ft. deep, surely at that depth they would get clean, safe water. But they didn't, it was also polluted.

The needs were immense at the orphanage, as they are everywhere. War in Syria, drought in southern Africa, street violence in Central America, it can be overwhelming. And it's not just the world out there, it's us, we also have pressing needs in our lives and in our families. I've never met someone whose life was full and sufficient in every respect.

And when we pray, we bring many needs before God. We pray for forgiveness and for healing, we pray for peace and for justice, we pray for wholeness in our families and for wisdom among our leaders. In prayer we bring immense bundles of need before God. And after those needs are met, then we express our gratitude to God, then we are thankful; not before.

And I have every confidence that on Thanksgiving, we will thank God for the many blessings we've already received. We will thank God for faith and church and family. We thank God for the goodness of creation, for color, for music, for friends, for children. Those are all wonderful things that we can and should be thankful for, they are things that God has already blessed us with. The natural thing is to thank God for good things after we've received them, not before.

Except that on Thanksgiving when we sit down to tables heavy with food, we will give thanks before we partake in the blessing. Why? Why would we give thanks before we even take the first bite? The usual order of things is to receive the blessing first, and afterward give thanks for it. But Jesus did it differently.

Jesus asked Philip, "Where can we get enough food for these people?" Philip said, "Two hundred denarii wouldn't be enough to buy bread for each of them even to get a just little." Two hundred denarii was nearly a year's wages. Today we might say, "Even if we had \$30,000 or \$40,000, we still couldn't feed everyone."

When you can't afford to eat out, you dig a little deeper in the cupboard, so Philip's brother Andrew went to see what was available. He reported that there was a boy with 5 barley loaves and 2 fish. A multitude of hungry people, and all they had was a little boy's sack lunch. That was nothing to be thankful for.

But Jesus took those 5 loaves and 2 fish and he gave thanks. What an amazing sight that must have been. Maybe some of the people laughed at him, or thought he was being foolish: "Jesus, you don't understand. We don't have enough food, and we don't have money to buy more." This was no time to offer a prayer of thanksgiving; Jesus should give a desperate cry for help. When you're in a state of need you ask for more; if you get it, then you give thanks.

But the example of Jesus is to give thanks even in the midst of need. In the face of the brokenness in our world and the emptiness in our lives, we can and should offer God our thanks. We give thanks in the face of need because our needs do not defeat God's grace.

The lack of food didn't stop God's grace in our gospel lesson. Those loaves and fish were multiplied, and the whole company of people ate and 12 baskets full were left over. Now we are called to follow that example and give thanks in the face of our needs. We are to give thanks even before those needs are met.

We can thank God when we are confronted with grief, knowing that every tear will be wiped away. We can thank God in the midst of war, for the Prince of Peace shall reign. We can thank God in the face of oppression because we have heard the promise that justice shall roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. We thank God in the face of sin, knowing that in Christ we obtain forgiveness. We needn't wait for a future blessing in order to be thankful, because the greatest blessings are already promised. And we share this good news with the world, it's what we call evangelism.

And those children at Elim Orphanage in the Henan province? We in Global Ministries were very thankful for them, and we had faith in God's grace. So we helped drill another well, this time it was 2,000 feet deep. The water is pure and clean, and they have enough to sell in the community to raise money to support the orphanage. Thanks be to God.

On Thursday, we will sit down to our Thanksgiving meals. And before we take the first bite, before we've received the bounty of the land, we will give thanks. For us giving thanks must always come first. Amen.