

**1** So I Googled “Traditional Thanksgiving Dinner” as an image search, and this is what appeared. That might be someone’s traditional thanksgiving dinner, but it’s not mine, I’m pretty sure that’s a bowl of brussels sprouts behind the wine glass. Seriously? Did any of your serve brussels sprouts with your thanksgiving dinner? And the dish behind and to the left of the brussels sprouts, at the top center of the image? I have no idea what that is. That might be sweet potatoes in the upper right corner, but it doesn’t look like they’ve been mashed and covered with brown sugar and pecans and marshmallows. And what’s with the food in the foreground. I like asparagus, but on Thanksgiving Day? I want the green bean casserole with onion ring pieces on top. And the whole cranberries? If it’s not cranberry jelly fresh from the can and cut into slices, then it’s just not Thanksgiving dinner. And don’t get me started on those weird looking rolls in the lower right-hand corner. I want the soft, squishy buns with the flour dusted on top and a big slab of butter. And I see the gravy pitcher at the far left, but where are the mashed potatoes?

How about you? What’s your idea of a traditional Thanksgiving dinner? Did you have one this year? Did you eat at home, or are you one of the approximately 10% of Americans who had their Thanksgiving dinner at a restaurant instead?<sup>1</sup> Is it the food that makes it traditional, the place you eat it, or the people you share it with? I celebrated Thanksgiving at my mom’s place with at least the portion of my family who could be there. We did eat many of the foods that are traditional for my family, and like many of you, we shared the tradition of thanking God for all we are grateful for- our family, our health, our jobs, our homes, and of course the delicious dinner that we enjoyed together. But every year that we go through the annual Thanksgiving rituals, I wonder. Is it possible that we were created and called to give thanks more often than just once a year? Is it possible that God’s idea of thanksgiving goes quite a bit beyond the annual turkey and cranberries and all the other good comforts we enjoy at this time of the year?

We’ve spent the last month recommitting ourselves to live to give: Service, sacrifices, hope, worship, and grace. Today we’ll remember that all our lives are to be saturated in

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.foodnewsfeed.com/fsr/flavor/how-many-americans-will-eat-out-thanksgiving>

thanksgiving, not just gratitude for the creature comforts that we enjoy, but a grateful joy that comes from following and serving the risen Christ.

**2** If you had to guess which parts of the Bible had the most encouragements to thanksgiving, what would you guess. Certainly the Psalms, like Psalm 100, contain many exuberant exhortations to thanksgiving. The image of entering God's gates with thanksgiving is supposed to bring to mind a noisy, joyful parade of people, singing praises to God, entering Jerusalem as they prepare to worship God at the Temple. In the New Testament, you might be surprised to learn that it's the Apostle Paul who gets crowned as the champion of thanksgiving. Over and over again, Paul offers and encourages thanksgiving in his letters. Let's see what we can learn from Paul about living to give thanksgiving. I'm reading from Philippians chapter 4, verse 6-7 in the New Living Translation. **{Read passage}**

**3** Let's start with what thanksgiving is not: worry. All of us worry at times. That's part of our fallen, human condition. Paul suggests that an antidote to worry is prayer. "Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done."<sup>2</sup> That an interesting formula for prayer, isn't it? So simple, and yet backwards from the way I was taught to pray. The little prayer mnemonics like ACTS always put the asking at the end (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication), almost as if somehow we have to appease the king with flattery before we can earn the privilege of asking for a royal favor. But I wonder. If we're honest, it's usually our need that drives us into prayer, rather than a felt need to praise and thank God. Don't you think God is perfectly aware of that? So Paul tells us that instead of wallowing in our worry, take it to God in prayer, laying out our needs plainly and simply. Watch what happens next. "Don't worry... Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done." We move from worry to asking God for help to giving thanks to God. The thanksgiving in that prayer formula is sort of like an amen, an affirmation that the same God to whom we've just bared our poverty to in reciting our needs is the same God who has been faithful time after time in so many uncounted ways. Giving thanks to God not only honors God. It reminds us of God's faithfulness and build our own faith that the King of Kings will

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<sup>2</sup> Philippians 4:6, New Living Translation (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)

hear and answer our prayer,

**4** One of the interesting things about life for the Philippians during the time Paul wrote his letter to them is that there was a Roman Garrison stationed there to protect the town and keep order. Continuing on in his letter, Paul writes, “Then you will experience God’s peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.” That word “guard” might have been an intentional allusion to the presence of those Roman troops. When we turn away from worry, and turn to God in prayer instead, laying out our needs and thanking God, God will honor that by sending us peace. Not a fragile kind of peace, easily broken like a temporary cease fire. A strong and active peace, stronger and swifter than a whole legion of Roman soldiers; a peace that will not only live in our hearts and minds, but will actively guard them against falling into the abyss of worry in the future. And that, writes Paul, is a hallmark of the way our lives are meant to be as we follow Jesus. Following Jesus doesn’t mean we’re walking 100 paces behind, it means walking with the Spirit of Peace burning within our own hearts and minds, as intimately a part of us as the blood flowing through our veins, and just as necessary for us to live life fully. So first and foremost, thanksgiving is an attitude of prayer, rooted in an honest recognition of our neediness before God and a faithful expectation of God’s good and faithful provision.

**5** Read any of Paul’s letters, and you’ll see how Paul models this and elaborates on it. Thanksgiving, Paul writes, is something that overflows from our hearts as we grow in our rootedness in Jesus. He writes in Colossians 2:7, “Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness.” When I read that I imagine an apple tree loaded with apples. If you uproot a tree, it won’t grow any fruit. Thanksgiving, Paul tells us, is like the apples that naturally come forth in our lives when we grow deep roots into Jesus.

Thankfulness is a posture of prayer that we can and must cultivate in our lives. Paul writes in Colossians 4:2, “Devote yourselves to prayer with an alert mind and a thankful heart.” And in Ephesians 5:18-20, he explains that God makes that kind of thankful prayer possible through the Holy Spirit. Paul writes, “[B]e filled with the Holy Spirit, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, and making music to the Lord in

your hearts. And give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” In other words, thankfulness is actually a fruit of the Holy Spirit, a fruit that simply won’t mature without deep roots in Christ through prayer.

**6** Let’s go back to our Thanksgiving dinners. Did yours look anything like this? Could it be that the turkey and the cell phones on the table are the only things that our Thanksgiving experiences had in common, or is there something else, something deeper? I want you to remember what you gave thanks for as you prepared to eat, and if you didn’t give thanks, it’s not too late to do so right now. Were you honest with God about your great need for God’s provision in your life? Did you thank God for your daily bread, the food that gives you the strength to get up and live each day, as well as the other kinds of daily bread, like the smile on the face of someone as they greet you, or the sound of a loved one’s voice on the telephone from many miles away? Did you thank God for the air in your lungs, something we never even think about until we’re no longer able to breathe in and out with ease?

There is something deeper that all our Thanksgiving dinners shared in common. It may or may not have been acknowledged out loud as you gathered around the table. Whether you prepared a meal, ordered out, or did what I did- just showed up and ate, the Holy Spirit was seated at the table with you, inviting you to prayerfully acknowledge your dependence on God and thankfully remember all that God has done for you. It could be that you weren’t served the right kind of cranberries, or the mashed potatoes weren’t as lumpy as you’d have liked. But were you able to see the hand of God’s provision in your meal and the lives of those you shared it with? Let’s take a moment to do so now.

*Gracious God, we confess to you this morning our complete dependence on you. We truly are dust apart from your Spirit who gives us life. So each of us names to you now, in the quiet of our hearts, our needs of this day...[Pause]...Remind us now, Lord, of that which you have already done for us- the answered prayers, your comfort in the midst of our pain, your encouragement to us, offered through another, the miracle of birth, the endurance to persevere during trials. Now grow in us a heart of faith, that we might grow in our trust of your goodness and allow your Spirit to produce an abundant harvest of thanksgiving. Amen.*



# *Buffalo United Methodist Church*



*...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!*

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