

**Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46**  
**Christ the King Sunday A; 11.26.23; G. Miles Smith+**

It could be that I'm mis-remembering things--but I cannot recall any association, in my early years growing up, between church and Thanksgiving Day. I'm sure our preachers must have referred to Thanksgiving in their prayers and sermons the Sunday before or after, but maybe I was too busy scribbling on an offering envelope? :) I don't know. I definitely know that we did not have a special service for Thanksgiving Day—and we sure didn't have the Blessing of the Hounds! My memories of Thanksgiving are: the Macy's Day parade on TV in the morning, staying in my pajamas longer than usual, lots of cooking in the kitchen, a larger than usual early afternoon dinner (especially, turkey, dressing, and cranberry sauce), then a somewhat sleepy afternoon, and lots of leisure time with family. And so, whenever I experience anything similar to that, like I did this Thanksgiving, then it is easy for me to be both nostalgic and thankful.

It is important to have opportunities to rediscover thankfulness and gratitude—like Thanksgiving Day. And it is also part of the intention of our Sunday gatherings of worship to rediscover thankfulness and gratitude on a more regular basis—even without turkey, dressing, and cranberry sauce. The early English Christians who came to establish colonies in this country among the native Americans, and who were largely responsible for the emergence of Thanksgiving Day as a special holiday, clearly thought of thankfulness and gratitude as a religious *duty* and *responsibility* to God. And while we may not talk that way as much as they did, *the call* to thankfulness and gratitude is continuously embedded in our Sunday worship, with our hymns and prayers.

The call to thankfulness and gratitude is intended to shift our focus on life. And some of us need it more than others, perhaps depending on how we are “wired” or our life experiences. Responding to the call to thankfulness and gratitude is certainly not about minimizing the hardships of life--but *rediscovering again how precious life and God really is*. It is like rediscovering our early capacity, when we were a child, for experiencing the wonder of life—which is something Jesus referred to when he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3).

My favorite writer these days is a philosopher/theologian named David Bentley Hart. And he has become somewhat famous for a quote which ended up being featured in U2 rock concerts years ago and re-quoted in many other settings. And this is what he wrote: “*Wisdom is the recovery of innocence at the far end of experience.*”

And I think you could say that it is also true that...*thankfulness and gratitude...is...the recovery of innocence at the far end of experience*. And Thanksgiving Day may be such an opportunity...at least for a while...to recover our innocence...before the wonder of life and God...which we once instinctively knew.

But that is not all. For also at the “far end of experience” there is something else waiting to be discovered. It is not unfamiliar either—but it also gets easily lost to us as we tend to our continuously complicated lives. It is revealed to us in the Gospel of Matthew, in Jesus' story of the judgment of all peoples before the glory of God. And there, it is not a question of whether we are *thankful*...or even if we have *faith*...but if we are *merciful*. In Jesus' story, everyone is surprised that mercy is so preeminently important. And I dare say that we are too.

It has never seemed to occur to us to have an annual *Mercy Day*. Perhaps *Christmas* comes close when it stirs up a sense of mercy for others. And our Sunday worship is intended to be a regular return to mercy through the Absolution of Sin, the Passing of the Peace, and Holy Communion. But if Jesus had not told such a story, I'm not sure we would have ever imagined that mercy is the ultimate calling of all human beings before God.

But we are challenged today—making yet one more twist on David Bentley Hart's words-- to imagine that “*mercy is the discovery of wisdom at the far end of experience.*”