Thursday, November 22, 1984
THE THERAPY OF THANKFULNESS
Psalm 92:1-4; Psalm 100; I Thessalonians 5:16-18

The title of this sermon was given to me by a woman who attended this service here two years ago. As she was leaving the church service and shook my hand, she said to me, “I’ve always believed in the therapy of thankfulness.” The next day I wrote that phrase down and vowed to use it as the title for the next thanksgiving sermon — and so today here it is.

There are two texts for this morning’s sermon. In Psalms 92, we are told — "It is good to give thanks to God.” And in Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, he reminded them: “Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in ALL circumstances.”

When we were little children, our parents and others undoubtedly urged and taught us to say “Thank You” when something nice was given to us — a Halloween treat, a birthday present, a Christmas present.

That makes a good beginning for learning to be thankful. However, too many of us grow up and still think of thanksgiving in those terms. We think of thankfulness as an act, as being grateful for specific objects or events or people.

Hopefully, we will grow in our thankfulness so that it becomes an attitude as well as an act — a stance toward life.

That’s what St. Paul was urging the Thessalonian Christians to do — to give thanks in ALL circumstances. It is good to give thanks to God, no matter what. In other words, there is a therapy — a healing power in thankfulness as such.

What are some of the results of this therapy?

1. First, the proper attitude of thankfulness leads to humility. And there are none of us who ever has enough humility. Jesus told about a Pharisee and a sinner who each offered a prayer. The Pharisee prayed, “God, I thank thee that I am not like other people,” in other words — "God, I thank you that I am better than others" — there’s no therapy in that kind of thankfulness.

Perhaps no other result of the therapy of thankfulness is as necessary in our time as that of humility.

Recently in an article in the New York Times Magazine, entitled “THE HEARTLESS SOCIETY,” John Kenneth Galbraith pointed out in an affluent society as ours, those of us who are reasonably comfortable, find reasons for exempting ourselves from concern for the poor. WE have difficulty being humble.

Galbraith says that on few matters has the human mind been so resourceful — we, the fortunate, have managed to get the impoverished out of our thoughts and off our consciences.

How have we done this? With a lack of humility, those of us who are the more fortunate have managed to convince ourselves that this is because we are the natural beneficiaries of superior intelligence, diligence, foresight, energy and morality. We have more because we deserve more, and it’s difficult to be thankful for that which we think we deserve.

And we have convinced ourselves that the deprived are the natural victims of their own insistent idleness, fecklessness or inferior abilities. Or we tell ourselves that their meager, mobile or causal existence is their preference as to mode of life — they are happier when they sleep under bridges or on the street grates. We think it is their choice.

At a higher level of sophistication, some social evolutionists have urged the exceptionally convenient thesis that poverty is the socially therapeutic agent that eliminates the unfit. When deeply defined, this thesis held that charity, since it abates the process, should be avoided.

A lingering instinct for this kind of social evolutionism remains today in the feeling that gifts to the undeserving poor, even to insolvent relatives, are somehow bad for their character. This kind of social evolutionism ironically has a comfortable association with some branches of fundamentalist theology, which holds that property expresses God's approval of the worthy.

Again, what is lacking in all this kind of thinking is humility which can only come from an attitude of thankfulness in all circumstances.

The stock brokerage firm that reminds us through its commercials that they make money the old-fashioned way — they inherit it — may be appropriate for the stock market — but there are a number of things in this world we do not earn, and cannot earn. And that's what we so often forget.

We do not earn life. Life is a gift — the whole world is a gigantic legacy. Love is a gift, or else it's not love at all. We do not earn love from another person or from God. Love is always a gift. All it requires is to be accepted as a gift.

To be honestly and thoroughly thankful and so to experience the therapy of thankfulness is to acknowledge that most of what we have is a gift, and that leads to humility.

2. Secondly, thankfulness can be therapeutic because it reminds us that we are not independent, but are connected to everything else that is. The connectedness of the creation, the interdependence of creation is a message that needs to be heard over and over again.

On Sunday, November 4, of this year, there was a fascinating article in PARADE Magazine about Dr. Jonas Salk, who years ago was the prime developer of a polio vaccine which has all but eradicated one of the most dreaded diseases in this century.

In developing a polio vaccine from killed viruses, Dr. Salk had challenged medical orthodoxy, according to which only vaccines made of living viruses could offer durable protection. The controversies that followed, the passions and antagonisms that were aroused, thrust Salk into a different kind of laboratory — the laboratory of human behavior, of human values and emotions.

Out of this grew his conviction that the healing of sick minds had to go hand in hand with the healing of sick bodies. So, since 1955, the focus of his energies has shifted to include broader human problem as well as more narrow scientific ones — not only a sick body, but also a sick planet that he believes is going to become unmanageably sick unless we discover within ourselves our own healing power and instinctive wisdom. It is a question, in short, of our destiny as a species, as a planet.

We need, therefore, a new way, a new vision of seeing the world and ourselves. When we are preoccupied with survival, much of our behavior is dictated by fear, and it's the kind of fear that often has little to do with threats to our actual survival. Such survival behavior can be triggered by the fear of losing anything that we perceive as essential for our well-being — a relationship, a position, the good opinion of those around.

Salk believes that survival behavior has been ingrained in us for so long that our automatic response is to gravitate to it. So, switching to another view of thinking and reality is not easy — but it is both possible and necessary.

Until now, we often have over-emphasized independence — the belief that a single individual or a single nation can detach itself from everything else and still survive. And in our view of things, we have tended to see them in their separateness rather than with their connection and inter-dependence — we have over-emphasized diversity and differences. So, for example, we have tended to see persons as blacks and whites, or Indians, or Jews or Christians, or Moslems, rather than adjectives and nouns, as part of the human race which is itself connected to all of creation.

Worse still, we have then made some people inferior and others superior and have set up barriers to trust and forgiveness. If instead we are inter-dependent, then there is no one who is superior or inferior. We all need each other.

Now more and more if we are to survive as a world, we have to be able to see ourselves as part of a unity which transcends all differences. The unity and connections have always been there.

We are not made up, as we have always supposed of only our own parts. Rather we are shared, rented, occupied. At the interior of our cells, driving them, providing much of what we need to live, are the tiniest mitochondria, and in a strict sense they are not ours. They turn out to be separate creatures, very primitive bacteria, but without them we would not move a muscle, drum a finger, think a thought.

There are just one of the many kinds of little creatures which exist within us and around us. There are many tiny beings which work and live within our cells. Our cells are not the purentities that in the past we liked to think they were.

There are so many inter-connections within and between all creatures that we can now know about. Thus, true thanksgiving today means being grateful for all the help we get from all sorts of unknown creatures.

3. Thirdly, there is a therapy in thankfulness because it delivers us from cynicisms and anxiety. Someone has defined a cynic as an individual who knows the price of everything, but the value of nothing. Being thankful emphasized appreciation more than appraisal.

Being thankful can help us to see value where we thought there was none. Listen to what William Law has to say — "For it is certain that whatever seeming calamity happens to you, if you thank and praise God, you can turn it into a blessing. The true saint is not the one who prays the most, or does the most fasting, or who is the most eminent for temperance, or justice, but it is the one who is always thankful to God, and who receives everything as an instance of God's goodness and who is always ready to praise God for it."

Again, ST. Paul wrote — "Give thanks in all circumstance." Sometimes the change of a preposition in the English language makes all the difference in meaning. St. Paul said we are to be thankful in all circumstances, rather than for all circumstances. There is a difference between giving thanks for something and giving thanks in something. It certainly would be impossible to be thankful for some towering tragedy; it is not impossible to be thankful in it. Thus, some of the most sincere and strongest feelings of thanksgiving, some of the classic prayers have been uttered in the midst of the great trouble, when to the outsider it would see there was no cause for thanksgiving.

Not only does being thankful save us from cynicism, but it also saves us from anxiety and fear. Being anxious and full of worry is a disease that many of us have. But when we are in the habit of thanking God and also being grateful to our brothers and sisters in the human race, then we also come to trust that God will provide us with all things needful.

Yes, there is a therapy in thankfulness. It reminds us that the earth is God's and the fulness thereof, it teaches humility, inter-dependence, and saves us from cynicism, anxiety and fear.

So be thankful today, but also tomorrow and the next day. It is good to give thanks to God — more than that — it is good for us. Amen.