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### **THANKSGIVING: TOUCHING HOME PLATE**

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 Psalm 100

Searching the Internet for images of Thanksgiving, I saw pictures of families gathered at tables laden with food, wishing good things for each other, giving thanks for the blessings of the past year – safety, security, family, assistance and encouragement, charity and goodwill shown in communities, support shown after house fires, and hurricanes, and floods and disrupted lives, support to grieving families and friends after the death of loved ones.

I saw reminders to thank God for God's blessings to you, to our nation, to our world.

travel tips for those making the journey home on the busiest travel day of the year,

earnest tips on how to handle troublesome family members home for the holiday.

One of those humorous ecards that pop up on screen read: "Thanksgiving is all about getting your entire dysfunctional family under one roof and hoping the police don't get called!"

One cartoon pictured a family sitting at the table, obviously days after Thanksgiving, because the father says; "I don't mean to complain about leftovers, but I've already said grace for this meal three times." Turkey is delicious, but after days of it, we get tired of leftovers and start hoping for something fresh.

Leftovers can be a disappointment! We like and expect the best.

Charities tell us that they receive donations of sofas and chairs with rips in them, stained bed sheets and towels, clothing that is too damaged to be of any use, and canned goods either past their expiration date or banged up and dented. It's sad that people offer worthless items to those in need, things that, if they really thought about it, they would not want to receive themselves. Leftovers can be a disappointment!

The theme of leftovers versus the best is at the heart of our reading from Deuteronomy this morning. As Theo (Baars) told us in his introduction to the reading, some Biblical scholars believe that our lesson is an outline of a ritual in the worship life of the Hebrews. They reenacted a ritual their ancestors established as they entered into the Promised Land after their wilderness journeys and escape from Egypt. They carried baskets of first fruits down aisles and placed them before the altar, verbally and visibly reminding themselves of God's deliverance of them from captivity in Egypt and providing for them in their new land. The words and the actions acted as a creed---an expression of faith as they rehearsed God's blessings to them and formalized their response.

The crux of the matter is summed up in verses 8-11:

The LORD brought us out of Egypt...He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now we bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, O LORD, have given us... We bow before you ...we thank you... we rejoice in all the good things you have given to us and our households.

This offering of first fruits wasn't a one-time thing; it became an annual celebration.

Firstfruits boils down to giving God our best---not our leftovers but the prime offering. First fruits remind us that everything we have is, first, a gift from God. We can enjoy our accomplishments and success, our financial wherewithal, our families and joys, our Thanksgiving gatherings, best when we pause to show appreciation for God's work in our lives.

When you gather at table with friends and families this Thursday, even with the crazy aunts and uncles and cousins whose political views, arguments, lifestyles and dietary choices disrupt the pleasantries of your meal, look around the table, the room, the restaurant, and see the people of your life.

Ask God to grant them goodness and mercy, to grant them peace within themselves and with others.

Thank God for the blessings you...they...we...all enjoy by God's grace and provision.

Thank God for God's goodness and balance in our world.

Thank God for prosperity and peace despite the social ills of our day,

Thank God for good health and good medicines, good treatments for our illnesses.

Thank God for charity and human kindness we see in this holiday season each year.

Thank God for his blessings in your life that may be hidden to others and which you need not name, but which you, in your heart of hearts, have come to realize.

And in your thankfulness, offer up to God your appreciation, your firstfruits, your thoughts, your intentions, your desire to please God and to know God's goodness in the new year as you did in the past year.

"Here's my basket, Lord, here's my best. Much obliged! Thank you!"

My sermon title, "Thanksgiving: Touching Home Plate," is prompted by another preacher's sermon illustration that touched me and made me think. Pastor Dennis Cook writes,

"In baseball home plate is the most important area on the field. People wouldn't consider playing baseball without home plate. Imagine running all around the other bases and all over the field with no specific place to end up. It would be meaningless if there was not some place to focus on.

For us, God is home plate. Too often we run to and fro, using up our precious time, energies and resources and forgetting to touch home plate. Personal devotions and time spent in the work, study and fellowship of the Church allow us to have home plate firmly secure in the field of dreams we call our lives" (Cook, 7).

**It seems to me that at Thanksgiving, we touch home plate.**

**We touch...we touch home...and we touch home plate.**

**We touch the people precious to us...**family, friends, church friends, even strangers with whom we share charity and hope by donated meals and humble service.

**We touch home.** Perhaps the house where we grew up, with the sounds and smells and sweet memories of our lives; perhaps in a new dwelling not of our choosing, not where we'd like to be, not under the new circumstances of our new situations in life.

At the same, we gather and break bread, we share news and catch up with one another, we remember those not at table with us this year. We say grace, perhaps hold hands and pray God's blessings, thank God for another year's provisions and deliverance. We celebrate our joys and laughter; share a tear, share a tender gathering at table, perhaps play games and take a walk in the cold air and the gathering dusk.

**We touch home...and touch home plate.** We return to God, the giver of all good gifts, and thank God for his provisions, his protection, his place in our lives. We place a basket of first fruits at his feet, bow our heads, open our hearts and thank God.

Thank you, Lord, for your goodness to me, to my family, my friends, my church, my country.

I realize all good things come from you. Thank you!

In return, I offer you my first fruits, my best...

my money, my time, my talents, my abilities, my attention, my service....

...all that you have given me, I offer to your use.

May I not give you my leftovers in the coming year, but my best, my focus, my love, my trust, my allegiance, my thanks, service, my willingness, my witness.

**It's a Wonderful Life:** When it all comes down to it, fame and fortune do not guarantee a happy family or a harmonious Thanksgiving dinner. Money and possessions do not guarantee you significance. Those things are not bad, of course, and they provide good things in life. But I suggest you thank God this Thanksgiving for **the places and people that keep you grounded, that touch your life and bless you. Who are some people who contribute to your life, and to whose lives you are able to contribute; they are one of God's greatest blessings to you. For whom will you thank God?**

That's one reason why *It's a Wonderful Life* remains one of the most beloved Christmas movies of all time. When George Bailey (played by Jimmy Stewart) contemplates suicide on Christmas Eve, the angel named Clarence helps him to see the difference his life has made. As it happens, three of the best lines in the movie come from the angel:

- "Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives. When he isn't around he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?"
- "You see George, you've really had a wonderful life. Don't you see what a mistake it would be to just throw it away?"

The third one isn't a spoken line. It's the inscription in a book left for George by the angel as the movie comes to its climax:

- "Remember, George: no man is a failure who has friends."

No person is a failure who has friends.

This Thanksgiving,

Reach out and **touch the people who enrich your life** and thank God for them.

**Touch base with home** – connect with family and friends who bless you, and who need a word of hope, of love, of thanks, from you.

Above all, **Touch home base** – come to God the source of all good gifts and thank him!

Deuteronomy 26:9-10 "(God) brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, O LORD, have given me."

Thank you!

Amen and amen! Happy Thanksgiving!

#### Sources

Cook, Dennis Cook, St. Timothy's Presbyterian Church, Ajax, ON, Canada.

<http://sttimothysajax.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/150208.pdf>