

Even though it does usher in the frantic Holiday season,
I love Thanksgiving because it is so good, simple and pure.
It centers around things that make life worth living—food, friends, family, gratitude.

And we all have so very, very much to be thankful for!

We could never do enough to give thanks to God for all that we have.
And yet, it is human nature to take things for granted, to fail to appreciate all of
the blessings that we have been given.

In fact, most people do not appreciate their blessings until they are gone.

Who appreciates youth when they are young?

Who really appreciates good health until they lose it?

Who appreciates having enough money, until they do not?

Who really appreciates other people until they lose them?

One of the most common comments I hear when I work with bereaved
families to plan a funeral is: I didn't realize just how much she meant to me,
until she died. I hear that again and again and again.

We try to be grateful, and appreciate this precious life while we live it,
but the truth is that we take so much for granted.

We are proud and selfish, and we take so much for granted.

John Templeton was a billionaire investor who was once asked the secret of
wealth.

He said that the secret of wealth is gratitude:

“ If you are not grateful you are not rich—no matter how much you have.

If you are grateful, you are rich—no matter how little you have.”

I consider gratitude one of the distinctive qualities of the spiritual life,
for if you are grateful you must have someone or something to be grateful to.

Our generous God has blessed us far beyond our deserving.

You know that by global standards, we are obscenely blessed.

Often when something terrible happens to people, they ask:

“What did I do to deserve that?”

But when people like us have more blessings than they deserve, we do not ask:

“What did I do to deserve that?”

What did we do to deserve all these blessings?

Enough food, shelter and security for several lifetimes,
this beautiful world, people who love us at our best and our worst,

a delightful and lovable church family, the mercy and grace of God?

What did we ever do to deserve that? Nothing, nothing at all.

We have those blessings not because we are worthy or special,

but so that we can bless this world in significant and lasting ways.

We choose to be grateful because we believe all that we have is a precious gift,
provided to us by our loving and generous God.

We all know people who have everything to be thankful for, but are not,

and those who seem to have so little, but are deeply grateful all the time.

I cannot tell you how haunted I have been by Frank Bingham and what he has lost.

His wife and two precious children gone in one terrible instant last weekend.

His loss is absolutely inconceivable, and it will be a sad Thanksgiving for him.

And yet, while his heart has been ripped apart,

he is busy thinking of ways to bless others, so that his family's legacy will live on.

People were asked to bring children's books to the funerals last week,

and to give to a foundation which will help children and animals.

We should all be humbled by the way he is trying to bring goodness out of
unspeakable tragedy. And we need to keep him in our prayers,

As I was doing the preparation for my sermon series this month on the theme

"God Has Provided" I thought about all of the things God has provided me.

I am so richly blessed with faith, family, money, health, my church.

But one of the things I have come to appreciate more as I have gotten older,

is the gift of friendship.

Now I do not use the term loosely, and by friendship I do not mean the superficial
relationships which we all have in abundance.

I am sure you remember the most successful TV show ever was called "Friends."

For 10 years people would religiously watch this show about 6 friends

in New York City trying to navigate their way through life and love.

It was cute, but when it ended in 2004 some people were in profound mourning,

because they actually admitted that they felt so much closer to

Rachel, Ross, Pheobe, Chandler, Monica and Joey than to their own friends!

That is a sad commentary upon the state of human relationships.

By friendship, I mean deep, honest, long term relationships which mature over
time.

I mean the people who are there for you when they would rather be anywhere else,
the people who love you at your most unlovable.

More and more I cherish the authentic and supportive relationships in my life, although I really do not have very many, to tell you the truth.

I guess I am just too busy, and my job does not always lend itself to the sort of mutual intimacy and reciprocity that friendship demands.

Being a minister can be hard on your social life, trust me.

It prevents some folks from seeing you as a normal (or fun!!) human being.

But I will tell you why the gift of friendship is particularly meaningful to me.

Aside from the obvious fact that you can never have enough people who love you, a recent survey of pastors conducted by Quiet Waters Ministry revealed this:

50% of clergy have considered leaving the ministry in the last 3 months.

50% of those who go into full time ministry will leave it within 5 years;

70% have much lower self esteem now than when they started;

94% are pressured to have the perfect family; 90% work 50 to 75 hours each week

90% feel inadequately prepared to deal with the complexities of today's problems;

15,000 pastors will be fired from their jobs this year.

Underlying all of this is a profound isolation and loneliness, and the emotional toll that comes from constantly giving to others, without getting much in return.

Ministers often have nowhere to turn, and nobody they can really turn to.

I think that is why every week we see some new form of bizarre behavior or glaring hypocrisy from clergy of all denominations.

Clergy are increasingly broken, isolated and alone.

I share those things with you not to focus upon clergy, because so many of you have jobs and lives that are extremely demanding, as well.

I share these things to illustrate why honest and supportive relationships are such a precious, precious gift.

They can heal you, help you, and keep you sane.

To have the safety of being completely yourself with someone, without fear of judgement or condemnation.

To receive unconditional acceptance and grace, forgiveness and mercy, compassion and understanding.

What priceless gifts that make life worth living.

A true friend is God in the flesh.

A young boy was just terrified of the dark.

His mother told him that God was with him in the dark, not to fear.

He said, "I know God is with me, but I'd much rather have a God with skin on."

Wouldn't we all?

That is what we see when someone genuinely befriends us, God with skin on.
And of course that is what we see in Jesus Christ, God with skin on.

The first thing Jesus did as he began his ministry was to hand pick some people to
be his friends.

He picked common fisher men like James, John, Simon and Andrew,
he picked a hated tax collector like Levi,
he picked a scorned woman like Mary Magdalene,
and his dear friends in Bethany, Mary, Martha and Lazarus,
whose home would be a place of refuge and rest for him.

He picked them because he knew how important it was to have people he could
trust, confide in, and depend upon.

He knew he had to have people with whom he could be himself, even when it
meant expressing his anger, disappointment, and fear.

He knew that these people would love and support him, and
continue his ministry after his death.

He knew that he was investing all that he had in these unlikely friends.
And I am sure he knew that they would eventually deny, betray, and abandon him.

And so John 15 tells us that not long before his passion and death,
Jesus gathered these friends and tells them how much they mean to him.

He says they are not his servants, but his friends, and he will love them forever.

He tells them to honor him by loving each other.

He tells them the ultimate expression of love is to be willing to die for one another.

It is really a remarkable definition of friendship. To be willing to die for a friend.

And of course, Jesus was giving them a glimpse of precisely what was about to
happen to him, how he would soon pour out his life in sacrificial love for these
friends, and for all humanity.

There is no greater love on this earth than to have a friend who would die for you.

That is the sort of friend we have in Jesus Christ, and it is a gift beyond measure.

I hope that we can be worthy of a friend like Jesus,
and even be that sort of friend ourselves.

James Taylor "You've Got A Friend"

James Taylor song "You've Got A Friend"