

October 9, 2016 “When Heaven Breaks Through” Romans
15:1-7

Thanksgiving is one of my favourite holidays. And it is not just because of the fine dinner that will be part of the celebration as our family and friends gather around the dining room table at the farmhouse later today. I would be dishonest if I did not confess turkey, dressing, vegetables and pumpkin pie make up one of my favourite meals. But this weekend is about so much more than mere food and drink. It starts with the priority, agreed to some time ago to get the family together in one place to share the experience. In other words, it is a celebration of love. In fact it is a celebration of love within the context of faith in the God who has saved us through faith in Jesus Christ. I apologize if the view seems narrow...but I make the claim that Thanksgiving is a uniquely Christian festival.

And that is part of the reason I turn to Romans 15 on a morning such as this is. The recognition that there is a deep need on the part of followers of Jesus to give thanks to God is one of the primary realities of this time of year. And as Romans 15:1-7 makes clear at least a part of that giving of thanks involves checking our spiritual compass to see if we are sailing in the right direction. And the right direction is not one based on our own appetites or tastes, but rather our ability by the means of faith to journey, to live according the priorities of our Lord and Saviour, according to the priorities of the God who has revealed Christ to us, according to the priorities of the Holy Spirit who is part of our experience and reveals to us the need to share such a season as this is.

Thanksgiving as Romans 15 colours the experience involves a number of things. Recognizing a number of realities. The apostle Paul wrote, and the truth stills holds, “We who are strong

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ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.” There are at least three things in that single verse that come to bare on a day such as this is. First of all we need to recognize that by the grace of God alone, we are strong. We are well off. We will celebrate this weekend with an abundance of food. In times past we all would have grown it. The fact is today, it is the truth, whether we garden or not, we can afford it. We will eat well. We have closets that are full of clothing. We are warm inside our homes. And not just at this time of year, rather we have been given by God and HIS blessing of our efforts, that lifestyle. We eat well every day. We are clothed every day and we can change our attire often. We are comfortable in our homes season after season and year after year. We are strong and well, and we need to recognize that truth. And as people of faith, faith that finds its focus in the Lord Jesus Christ, we need to recognize that well being is a gift of God and hence, the need to give Thanks to HIM.

Secondly we need to recognize that if we are aware we are strong, well fed, well clothed, and well sheltered, there are an abundance of folk in our land, our province and even our community who are not. Who are in a much weaker position than ourselves. The reason we participate in the work and support the work of the local food bank is that we know there is need in our community. The reason a ministry such as Helping Hands blossoms and grows is because there are people around us who need warm hats and otherwise would not have them. Who need goods we can produce and give away to help them. A month ago I received my annual letter from one of the Mission Houses in the capital city of our province. Four dollars and seventy-five cents it said would feed someone living on the streets on Thanksgiving weekend. Each year they feed several hundred people.

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There is no way that we can deny there is need. There is no way we can deny that there are people living in our communities who need our help. And given our faith convictions there is also no way to deny (except hardness of the heart...uncaring hardness of the heart) that our God calls us to care for the neighbour who needs us to care. There are people who do not have our resources. The weak, just another word for the needy, are within our reach.

Which leads to the 3rd point in that 1st verse, “to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.” Knowing there are people in need, as followers of Jesus we have a duty to provide care, and not just to focus on our own well being. And yes, I got this letter a month ago because 3 years ago I began to contribute financially to their feeding of the needy at Christmas time. And yes, now I find myself helping with the feeding of the needy at both Christmas and Thanksgiving. And do you know what the greatest temptation is in all of this? The temptation to say I should not have to help out twice. It's the temptation to keep the small bit of money involved for my own use. And yes, because I am a follower of Jesus I do see it clearly as that...the temptation not to help those in need.

In December I will fight that battle with myself all over again. The battle of conscience. The battle of not letting my heart develop calousness toward the needy. God calls us to care. Jesus commands us to help our neighbour, the one who has need greater than our own. The Holy Spirit tenderizes our hearts to respond. He causes us to see the need, and for a brief moment in time to feel the pain of someone else's hunger. Part of the blessing which is this holiday of Thanksgivng, is the option to see the need of others and do something that is the very opposite of caring for yourself. I praise God for Thanksgiving. And people in need, who remind me I have received a greater portion of the grace of God than I deserve.

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Verse 4 of this little portion of the Roman letter of Paul reminds us that “everything that was written in the past was written to teach us.” That statement is tied to a quotation from Psalm 69. In other words it is not a general statement about ancient wisdom. It is a statement about the writings of the Old Testament. It is a statement we generalize only to this extent: it is about the instruction we find in the Biblical Word. It is a reminder to us that the Bible leads us and guides us and instructs us that faithfulness has a duty not only to God, but to our neighbours in need. And as people who care about what the Bible has to say about how we should live, and our duty to care for folks who need us, we have to hear and share what we have.

Thanksgiving is a season in which I find myself remembering how the Gospel has literally changed the world in which I live. In the part of the world in which you and I live there are programmes to aid the poor. They do not exist because people automatically think of sharing their goods. I do not mean to be depressing on a very happy day, but the nature of man tends toward selfishness. The Biblical word sin is accurate. Human nature focuses on the self. And one of the things the Gospel does is it changes that focus. The word of God says we must care about the God who made us and the people with whom we share life. Regardless of what others think.

The results are huge. In Canada an effort to provide for the poor is a core value. The effort to provide education universally so that people can contribute to bettering themselves and others. Hospitals are one of the gifts the Christian faith has given to the world. Healthcare in our own nation is not perfect. But where would we be without it? I would be dying at this point. So much to be thankful for on a weekend like this, and far beyond this weekend. All

because the sharing of the love of Christ has caused so many to share so much.

And if there is a danger to that reality, surely it is that the weakening of the Christian influence upon our values as a society means we could become a more callous and mean spirited society. A more self centered society that we are. There are very few people out there trying to provide meals for the needy, the homeless and the working poor...just because they think we should be nice to people. These missions that feed the hungry in our major cities are almost all church and Christian faith based. We do not talk about that enough. Even among ourselves. It is a measure of the degree to which Christianity and faith in Jesus has changed the face of our society. Some are fed. Some are cared for. Some pray for us, because they receive a meal. Imagine that.

I said it at the beginning of this message. Thanksgiving is one of my favourite times of the year and certainly one of my favourite weekends. And the reason is it is not about me. It is about me turning my face toward heaven. The sign outside our church bore the message...feeling down? Look up! Because every time we turn our eyes upon Jesus we also wind up turning our eyes toward our neighbours. He does that to us. And with us. He changes our focus. He changes our direction and He gives us a new heart.

I usually pick Thanksgiving Hymns for this service, Hymns like Can A Little Child Like Me...with its chorus of Father we thank thee! In the spirit of this message this year I have picked different hymns...Make Me A Channel of Your Peace. Every one of us is an instrument of grace in the hands of the loving Redeemer. And shortly we will sing Spirit, Spirit of Gentleness, reminding us

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that God calls us to love HIM and care for others. And is not that the essence of Thanksgiving? I believe that is indeed when heaven breaks through and touches the earth.

God bless you. And may HE make you a blessing to others on this precious, precious weekend.

Let us Pray;

Lord we do thank you for every good thing we enjoy, and we confess some of those blessings we are tempted to take for granted. We pray Lord for people who are alone this weekend. For those whose lives are touched by grief. For those who will wrestle with a degree of uncertainty about their lives, that we have never known. We pray for the poor and we pray for the hungry. In asking for your blessing on ourselves, we pray that we might be able to see where we can help others and share with them. Tenderize our hearts that we might tenderize our world. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.