

## **“Gratitude and Guilt”**

Psalm 95:1-7; Psalm 51:1-10– Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – November 21, 2021

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might lift our hearts and voices  
in grateful praise, with nothing holding us back. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

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Raise your hand if you have a favorite Thanksgiving food you’re looking forward to eating this week. Or if there’s just a favorite food you associate with Thanksgiving, regardless of whether you’re expecting to eat it or not. What are some of those favorite foods? Now, keep your hand up if you’ve ever said or heard someone talk about that favorite food with phrases like this: “Oh, I can’t believe I’m going to eat another helping! I’m so bad!” “It’s my guilty pleasure.” “I’ll have to make up for this later.” “I’m going to be naughty and have another piece.”

Why do we do this? Why do we take the elements of our celebration of gratitude, the foods that bring us pleasure – not just because they’re tasty but because of the feelings and memories they evoke – and attach all this emotional baggage and moral turpitude to them? Why do we infect our gratitude with all this guilt? Why do we label the foods that are supposed to be signs of celebration and abundance as “bad” or “naughty”? Now, obviously, we know that a balanced diet with plenty of fruits and vegetables and fiber is the healthiest way to live. But the key word there is “balanced,” and Thanksgiving is only once a year. It is not “bad” to indulge in this celebration. You may have indigestion, but you’ll get over it and it’s not a sin.

Obviously, we don't just hear people talking about certain foods being "bad" around Thanksgiving. But it is the primary holiday centered around food in our culture, and it's supposed to be about gratitude. It struck me this week how much this holiday that supposed to help us express thanks is, perversely, tied up with so much guilt. Let me say it clearly: calories do not make food "bad". The only thing that could make a food morally questionable is if workers or the land were exploited in its production, but you don't usually hear people making excuses about that part. It is not helping anyone when we attach this moral value to food, even if we think our intentions are good. It is not a bad thing to encourage one another to be healthy. But we must not confuse "health" with righteousness. And we shouldn't conflate "health" with being skinny either. Health exists at many weights and in many shapes. Being skinny and even being healthy does not make anyone more worthy or deserving or better than others. All the guilt we attach to food is rooted in these deeply rooted and unhelpful standards of beauty and morality.

I want to talk about gratitude today and about three ways we let guilt ruin our gratitude. You might say this is a 5G sermon (though I'm not getting my booster till tomorrow!). Our first G is Gratitude. We know gratitude to be a Christian value. We know it to be one of our best natural instincts. Science has shown us that gratitude is healthy; it's good for our mental state and our blood pressure. So wouldn't it be nice if we could enjoy this holiday dedicated to gratitude without the unwanted guest that often accompanies the day, our second G – Guilt?

So how do we release ourselves from this unhealthy obsession with punishing and shaming ourselves for the pleasure we indulge in at a celebration? I would suggest that a helpful third G here is Grace. Grace is a bit of a mystery, of course, but in this context, we can narrow it down a little by looking at the aspects of grace that help release us. Grace is not just forgiveness, and it's not just love. Grace is the kind of mercy that is rooted in unconditional love that accepts us just as we are, and rather than merely forgiving us, reminds us that who are is not thing that requires forgiveness. God loves how much you pumpkin pie. God loves how much I love mashed potatoes and stuffing. God takes delight in our pleasure. We don't need forgiveness for enjoying the fruits of God's creation. This is the kind of Grace that can help protect our Gratitude from the ruinous effects of Guilt.

There are, however, other sources of guilt at Thanksgiving besides the food. For many people, Thanksgiving involves one of more large family gatherings. And for many people, this can bring forth unhealthy family dynamics that induce guilt. In addition to the shared memories of good times and the love that carried the family through hard times, there can be misplaced or unfair expectations, hurts and slights from years ago, comparisons to more successful cousins or friends. Maybe you failed to do the thing everyone was counting on you to do. Maybe you simply can't be the person they want you to be. Why do we do this to each other? I can't tell you, but I do know the kind of guilt it induces is not holy; it is not something that requires repentance. Instead, I would suggest our fourth G – Growth. We don't escape these

guilt trips by apologizing and trying to assimilate to unreasonable, unhealthy demands. We are released from this kind of guilt by growing out of the need to please people who cannot embrace us for who we are. It's not easy, of course, but growth is the only way out. If we can offer ourselves that Grace – the unconditional acceptance and merciful love – we can eventually Grow so that those unhelpful pressures from loved ones no longer keep us from appreciating the blessings our families have provided.

Finally, there is another form of Guilt that can arise in the midst of Gratitude that I want to address. Sometimes, as we're counting our blessings, naming them one by one, the list goes on and on, and we're struck by how much we have that others don't. The painful truth is that some of us are far more fortunate than others. Sure, you can always look around and see someone who has things much better than you. But Jesus calls us to keep in front of us the ones who have less. Someone doesn't have family around to gather with. Another doesn't have the money for a big meal. Others don't have homes to live in, while still others have had to leave their homelands just to survive. How do we enjoy our blessings, when we're so aware of others who barely have enough to survive? This is the kind of guilt that haunts us, and it could be that's a good thing. The solution to this kind of guilt is our fifth G – Giving. Generosity is the only faithful response to the blessings of abundance. As the saying goes, "when you have more than you need, build a longer table, not a higher wall."

There is a reason that the season from Thanksgiving through the New Year is when the most charitable giving happens. And it's not just because people want those end-of-the-year tax deductions. Giving to others is a natural and holy response to gratitude. It's a way of amplifying gratitude. Generosity gives gratitude depth and power, by multiplying the blessings we've received into blessings for others. This food here on the chancel, waiting to be delivered to St. Martin's food pantry; the gifts you all are signing up to provide for the moms and kids at the El Nido shelter; the coffee and bacon and hot showers we will work to provide with warmth and love at Welcome Saturday next month – all of these are expressions of holy gratitude, the kind that can't be sullied by guilt. Open-handed, open-hearted gratitude is immune to guilt because it recognizes that no blessing we have is for us alone and immediately moves into a posture of giving. Whether it's about stuff or money or our relative positions of privilege in society, sharing what we have for the benefit of all is the purest form of gratitude; it is right worship of God, from whom all blessings flow.

So there is your 5G guide to a Happy Thanksgiving: Keep your Gratitude free from Guilt through Grace, Growth and Giving! Reject the guilt assigned to things that you don't really need forgiveness for, and transform the guilt that could come from excess by sharing. Eat the stuffing! Have a second piece of pie! Share the rest with someone else. This is how we enter in God's presence with pure hearts, to offer songs of thankful praise and joy! Hallelujah and Amen!