

## *Transcript Sermon 3 Thanksliving 2018*

My friends, as always, I speak to you in the name of the one who is our hope and salvation, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

I was just thinking about the choice between Sharon and Bram and coming to church. Obviously, Sharon and Bram are winning on some counts this morning. But that talks a lot to the situation of the church, our perceived relevancy in the world and the chasm that's come between culture and the church. It's seen right there in our doorstep. Today, there you've got two shows next door. There'll be many more people at the Storm game this afternoon, even though how many goals did they give up the last two games? And it goes like that. That's part of what we need to be thinking about in this season of stewardship. Being disciples, following with God. So as much as I'm sometimes bemoan the fact that what do we do, how do we compete, how do we reserve our parking which we don't have, how many people down in our parking lot have gone to Sharon and Bram? You have to at a certain point say 'hey, it's not about that.' It's about what are we doing in the world to show the world that we can and should and have to make a difference. There is a relevancy in it's not about us. It's about God and about Jesus.

Which brings us to where we are. In this series of sermons, we're in the season of stewardship. We're thinking about ThanksLiving. We started on Thanksgiving Day and we changed that one G to an L, so we have instead of Thanksgiving, ThanksLiving. Thanksgiving is great to say thanks, but what do you do with it? You live into it. So, the first week, we talked about it being an attitude. Then last week I talked about it being a pilgrimage, a way of being. Today I want to talk about how ThanksLiving needs to embrace the wholeness of our soul. That includes the hardest part: our sorrow, our brokenness; those parts of life that we all have. We live in a culture that says 'hey it's all about being good. If you're not feeling good, you just haven't bought the right product yet. Go buy some more. Go eat something. If you're not feeling really good with that; change your diet; eat something else. Make sure you look good. There's a way to look. We'll show you what it is. You'll better strive for it.' God's got to be pulling God's hair, because God made wondrous variety. There's a joy in God's wholeness, because God's ways are the way of suffering, the way of pain, the way of sorrow, I know, because I lived it intentionally for you. We don't want to think about that, do we? We only want to think about good. We don't want to think about when we're sad or when our dreams don't work out or when our relationships don't work. We're all supposed to get over it in an instant. I love what people do, even in a church in grief. They bring your more stews than you can eat in the first week. Then they forget about you by the second. You should be over it by the third. It doesn't work that way. Sorrow, brokenness, and suffering, is part of who we are. Scripture never shies away from it. It's part of our wholeness.

In fact, there's this story in Job, which is a narrative that talks about suffering and innocent suffering and it's abhorrent. But what happens is the devil who's in heaven at this point (it's not Dante's heaven and hell yet, which really isn't in scripture by the way), but here, it's the antagonist who makes a bet with God. "I bet that righteous guy you like, Job, I bet I can make him condemn you. I bet I can make him reject you". He's just got it easy. His life is good. He's got everything. So why wouldn't he say 'God's great.' So, God takes the bet. It's almost like that movie trading places I see, it's all like over a dollar. But it's not about God taking the bet. It's about what happens. Job, in the rejection, sits on ashes and wears sack cloth and he's lost everything; his family, his fortune, his identity, his place in society. He's got boils all over him. He lives a life that is just replete with suffering. He loses sight of God. That happens. He says in last week, "I don't know where God is. He's not in front of me; he's not behind me; he's not beside me; he's not here; he's not above me; he's not below me". His friends say "you have got to just reject this". God has condemned you to this. You either reject God.' That's the counsel he's getting. That's the counsel of the world. How is your God good who does this to you? But Job holds. God does meet and God does restore Job's fortunes. But along the way, Job has to learn something about humility and selflessness. So, in one of the encounters where God meets Job, the answer he gets, to quote George Bernard Shaw, is "so can you make a whale?" Like you're sitting there suffering, God finally comes to you and says, "can you make a whale?" In scripture it's Leviathan the sea monster. Can you make anything? Where were you when I created this? Where were you when I formed the earth? Where were you when I set it in motion? Where were you? Where were you? Who are you? That's difficult for us to think of God doing that. But God doesn't do it to put us in our place, because God later in the story, the story of Jesus, engages fully into our place and into our suffering, into our sorrow.

You see, suffering and sorrow, and aches and pains, and loss and bereavement, and all those things that we don't want in our lives, are in our lives. It is what we do with them. If we wallow into them, we're not doing anything right. If we see in them something that may lead us actually into empathy and a place of hope, not just for ourselves, but for those that we can reach out to who are hurting, maybe we've learned something.

Some of you may follow Richard Roar's daily posts. He's a Franciscan, and he is an amazing spiritual teacher. He has a regular post that comes out by email in various different ways every day. This past week, just ironically, he's been talking about suffering. Which has been helpful to me, because I knew in ThanksLiving I'd have to get to engage suffering at some point, because it's part of life. We want to ignore it, but it is part of our wholeness. He reminds us of the practice of *tonglen*, which is written about by Pema Chödrön. It's a Buddhist practice. Within many spiritual traditions, including Christian traditions, there's contemplation, there's meditation, and there's forms of prayer that centre in that. It always starts with breathing. When I teach people

that, I usually say what you need to do is centre away all your thoughts and concentrate on your breathing and see and feel that you're breathing in God. This is life. You die if you don't breathe. I've been with a lot of people at that point where they stop breathing, and they are dead. You breathe in God. Then think about the fact that you're called to breathe out God. So, what you breathe in, you breathe out at others. That air will be shared. If you think about that as a metaphor for who you are and how you are, you're taking in God and putting God out.

Well, the difference and the spin that this *tonglen* puts on it, that's a Tibetan word that means 'sending and receiving', is that it invites you to bring in what hurts; your brokenness, your suffering. Breathe in the pain but breathe out always good things; pleasure, happiness, joy, care. What it's inviting us to do is taking seriously our lives and not run from those things that hurt, but to breathe them in. Not so that they consume us, but so that in engaging with them, we may learn empathy and hope and life and love.

Another way of doing this is to address the realities and the fullness of our life and offer them always into God's care. One of my spiritual directors used to remind me of that always. And said what you need to do because in your profession you'll have too much to carry. You can't carry everybody's aches and pains. You will have to have a mechanism where you take them always at the end of the day and leave them at the altar of hope and leave them at God's feet. However, you image that.

So today I want us to think about ThanksLiving, even when things seem to be all messed up. Holding onto ThanksLiving even when there's suffering and pain, and particularly pain and suffering we don't understand. Some of the places where I've been in the world where I see great hope, even in desperation, even in violence, even in war, even in abject poverty. To still see hope and to be able to process your stuff enough so that you can have empathy to sit down with those and say 'I truly do understand your pain because I know my pain, my brokenness, my challenges, my lost opportunities, the times where I didn't succeed, the dreams of mine that have gone away, and I have the fullness of life. But I don't let that destroy me, because there is hope.' And you sit then as one like Jesus with those you meet.

Henry Nouwen talks about the wounded healer. You can only truly be that Christ-like presence if you've addressed your own woundedness, if you've addressed your own brokenness and brought it into the fullness of your being. I think ThanksLiving has a way to embrace that. We will not be the same. Everything transforms us. Every loss hurts. Every piece takes something away. But it also allows something more to come in. We've been talking about one of our prayers that we use often at funerals, at that time of death, is that may they go on living in our souls, in our consciousness, how they have been and shaped us. May we go on living in that fullness and

with God to be signs of hope and presence. We don't like to think about it, but suffering is part of the wholeness of life. The word whole and holy have the same root. When somebody is sainted as a few were last week, saint comes from sancta, which means holy. Holy and whole are the same thing. That all that we are and all that we have and all that we will be is with God and is of God and God knows. We need to live in a trust. So, I don't want your lives to be dreadful. I'm not saying that. I don't want us to be consumed by brokenness, and, no, there is much happiness. But if we never deal with the fact that suffering is part of life, we will never be whole and we'll never understand the fullness of Jesus.

Somebody's who present here, invited me over to their house the other week, because we had to do a very hard act of saying goodbye to a beloved friend. A dog. In that, he said some remarkable words to me. He said 'I don't know how you do what you do, Ralph. I don't know how you do your job.' He probably never heard my reply, because there was some grief involved, but my reply was 'I don't have a job.' I work for the church. I do a lot of administration, but my priestliness is a vocation. I truly strive to hold empathy in there. Empathy with those who are broken, those who are down trodden, those who are sorrowful and suffering. That can only come by engaging those places in my life where I have had that. There're a million stories I could tell you, and there's a million forgotten ones, but we all have our story. So, part of ThanksLiving is in that attitude and that way and that pilgrimage, is to embrace the wholeness of our life, including those bits which may not look good or may hurt or may bring suffering. And hopefully it will lead us into that place of empathy and hope, where we sit with God who heals and knows our whole being.