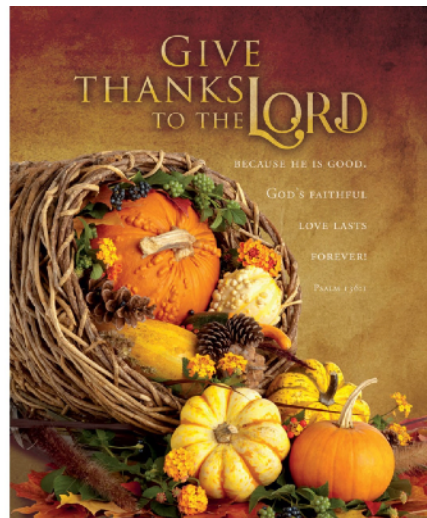


**Centre Congregational Church, UCC
Brattleboro, Vermont
November 19, 2023**

**The Reverend Dr. Scott Couper
Transcribed by A.I. and ZOOM**

“Thanksgiving for Enduring Love Forever”

Scripture Psalm 136



Source: ConcordiaSupply.com

Please be seated.

Make yourselves comfortable. Take a deep breath. Relax your shoulders and let us absorb the Word of God in its interpretation.

Let us pray.

Loving God, open our ears. open our minds and open our hearts. May we learn that which needs to be learned. And may I speak what needs to be spoken. Amen.

Please look at the cover of your bulletin. It's in really small print. I think it's the first verse of this psalm which AJ just read: Psalm 136, verse one.

It's a wonderful verse. You can read it there. Verse one is great.

It, of course, inspired our cover. Obviously, it inspired the scripture we chose to read. And, as you can see, it inspired the sermon title this morning: "Thanksgiving for Enduring Love Forever".

I chose Psalm 136 as our scripture reading this morning. But this week, as I read the whole psalm, and as I prayed on it, I became a little bit unsettled. I don't know if you did as well while hearing it.

If you listened closely to AJ, there's something unsettling going on in the scripture. There is a lot of killing, actually, in this psalm about Thanksgiving. War is referenced quite a bit. In this psalm, I hear killing being celebrated. Some of the psalm's contents make you shiver. All infant males in Egypt killed?! Doesn't that make you feel a little bit uncomfortable? Those are innocent children being killed, supposedly to the glory of God. The scripture gives thanksgiving for war and victory, that is, the displacement of many enemies, kings as well as innocent infants.

But there are wonderful things about this scripture. For example, thanksgiving for life, for creation, for sustenance, for faith. The psalm sings God's praise and speaks about God's faithfulness. The psalm expresses joy and appreciation for this life that we have and all of its blessings.

The lesson I put forward to you this morning is actually quite simple: It is right and it is good to be thankful. That's what I expressed, and I think appropriately, to the children. Yet, I offer two qualifiers.

First, we need to be careful about that for which we are thankful. The second qualification is that we at least need to put that for which we are thankful in context because the truth of the matter is that which we have, or that for which we can be thankful, can often come at someone else's expense.

And I think what troubles me a little bit about Psalm 136, though there's a great deal of right and proper thanksgiving offered, is that much of that being appreciated came at the expense of someone else.

I remember two quotations from Abraham Lincoln that really contextualize how we ought to be thankful to God this Thanksgiving Sunday.

Abraham Lincoln was never quite certain whose side God was on during the Civil War. Lincoln felt it was presumptuous to assume that one's own purposes were also God's. Lincoln said, "The will of God prevails. In great contests, each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be, wrong. God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time".

Lincoln drove home this point in his second inaugural address, possibly the finest speech ever delivered by American President. Speaking in March 1865 when the Civil War neared its bloody end. Lincoln pointed out that both combatants "read the same Bible and pray to the same God and each invokes God's aid against the other". Lincoln continued, "The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully."

Abraham Lincoln really understood the paradox of thanksgiving, for what and in what context. Therefore, we ought to be careful when invoking God's name in appreciation for blessings.

Often it is said that the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday's genesis comes from our ecclesiastical ancestors, Congregationalists, Puritans, who settled on the east coast of what is now called the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

The leader of these immigrants was John Winthrop. Winthrop said that our faith's, our ecclesiastical ancestors' purpose here in North America was to establish "a City on a Hill".

There was, it is true, initially, some 'right and good' thanksgiving offered for survival due to the assistance of the indigenous people. From there we have the whole mythology of Thanksgiving, the holiday which we are about to celebrate. But very soon after that early mythological thanksgiving, you have King Philip's war (see a recent article in *The Commons*). Following this war, our continent underwent the ongoing dispossession of land and the eventual genocide of an entire peoples of an entire continent to the point where the Native Americans today are almost but a remnant, struggling heroically to maintain their culture, their language, and their nations.

It's easy to pivot to our contemporary news. The Holy Land. We see the devastation wrought upon Gaza, the war between Hamas and Israel. (I'm not going into the politics in this sermon.)

There is a state of war in Gaza, for right or for wrong, and innocents are being killed. This war is part of the ongoing dispossession of land from the Palestinians. Sometimes, those who are oppressed become oppressors. The cycle continues because well, let's just be honest, I don't know of any single person or nation that has a monopoly on sin. Sadly, there's enough to go around.

A lot of what is happening today in Gaza is inspired by Psalm 136. 'God is on our side, and God encourages us to dispossess

someone else so that we can in the end be thankful for our blessings’.

One of the things I promised to do very briefly today is report on my sabbatical. The first month of my sabbatical I spent in El Salvador.

We can't review the history of Latin and South America, but it is in part dominated by the hegemony of the United States on that part of the world. From Chile (Pinochet) all the way up to Mexico, much of which was stolen in an act of war (the United States sort of incorporated a lot of Mexico into its territory).

We have, thanks to the Reverend Jack Bixby and the members of this church and its faithfulness, gained much knowledge about El Salvador and its history with the United States. So many decades ago, we established a relationship with a sister church in El Salvador that I had the privilege of visiting for a month.

So, as I think about the Puritans and Thanksgiving, as I think about the Holy Land gossip Israel, I also think about the United States and its troubled history with this hemisphere.

When I went to El Salvador in August, I spent the first two weeks with the wider church, the Lutheran Church in El Salvador. It is very closely partnered with the ELCA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (USA). While there for two weeks, I assisted the Bishop and others in hosting groups from the United States that were visiting El Salvador. So, in many ways, I returned to the tasks I did in South Africa as a missions co-worker, hosting groups that were visiting South Africa, or even as a lecturer for the School for International Training hosting study abroad students from the United States. I slotted right in and assisted with the conferences and with the transportation. I was basically an errand boy. To be perfectly honest, they needed candles; they needed bread; they needed communion wine; they needed

water; they needed cords or a microphone. I went out and purchased it and delivered. I was a helpful errand boy. The Lutheran church had a small role for me. That was fine. I just wanted to be present. I wanted to be useful. I simply wanted to serve in any capacity, to fill any hole that needed to be filled.

My second two weeks I spent with our sister parish church, Christo Redentor, which is in Apopa. It's a rather poor suburb outside of San Salvador. There I visited our Lutheran church school, which is right next to the church, and visited the principal. I was able to have lunch with the scholarship college student that our church supports. I was able to participate with Pastor Francisco in worship services. On the first Sunday I was there, I assisted in the celebration of Holy Communion. On the second week I was there, I was able to somewhat nervously preach the sermon in Spanish. It was really a wonderful time which I was able to visit families. I learned much about the country and the struggles and the difficulties its people endured in El Salvador.

In years past, the criminal gangs were a terrific problem for El Salvador, almost even holding the country hostage. Very few were immune from crime, rape, drugs, violence, and extortion. The gangs were all prevalent to the point where the country was almost suffocating.

A new President was elected. His name is Bukele. He was very popularly elected and he began a project of mass incarceration to control the gangs. A draconian means to tackle a draconian problem.

Bukele has an over 90% approval rating. The country is elated to be free from the gangs. However, there is a dark side to this light. The dark side is that, as was just communicated to me this morning from El Salvador, the church in El Salvador shared with me, that 80,000 people are now mass incarcerated in this huge

dragnet. Approximately 8,000 to 10,000 are innocent. It always happens if the quest for justice is taken too far. Injustice can dwell within justice. I was told this morning that that over 200 have died in prison.

Last week, we began praying for one of the members of our sister parish, Cristo Redentor: Samuel Rodriguez. Years ago, our church hosted Samuel in the USA. Our church assisted Samuel in receiving reconstructive surgery at the Shriners Hospital in Boston. Samuel is one of us. Samuel is one of us by virtue of he simply being a human being, by being a Christian, by being in El Salvador, by being in our partner, church (Cristo Redentor), and by being here with us and New England.

Two weeks ago Samuel was swept up in the mass incarceration. He is now imprisoned. He has a wife. He has two children, ten months old and eleven years old. This past Thursday, he had a legal hearing. Thank goodness, he has representation, a lawyer. I do not know Samuel's fate. Yet, we can as a congregation can support the wider and local church, Cristo Redentor, in Apopa, El Salvador. We can support Samuel by helping to feed him. Families of prisoners, usually poor families, have to pay a \$120 a month for their loved ones to eat in prison. We can support Samuel directly, and we can support this family, his wife and two children because he was the primary, if not the only, breadwinner.

Jennifer and I have also learned this weekend, that the police have come to the Lutheran church to ask if the school, specifically the Lutheran school, right next to the church, can be used as a garrison for the police and for the military. So, this is when the slippery slope of justice slides into right wing conservative dictatorship. It has happened over and over and over again throughout history. It can happen in our country too.

My time in El Salvador was rich. The work continues. I look forward to joining with all of you in continuing our partnership with our sister parish church.

So friends, I conclude this Thanksgiving Sunday message with the following:

One of the keys to spiritual wisdom is being comfortable with paradox. Father Richard Rohr speaks of paradox often. A paradox is two seemingly contradictory truths held together at the same time. I ask that this Thanksgiving that we be deeply thankful and appreciative to God for all that we have. That is right and good. I don't take a word of that away. Many of the mystics say that it is appreciation and Thanksgiving that is the heart, the core, of spirituality, to resonate, to connect, with God.

Yet, we must be careful that we do not thank God for perhaps an overabundance that has come at the expense of others. We should discern when that with which we have been blessed has, sometimes inevitably, even though not through our own fault, come at the expense of others.

We are thankful for our blessings. Yet we acknowledge our blessing sometimes come at others' expense. Therefore, we work towards those same blessings we enjoy also being bestowed on others.

Let us, therefore, be thankful faithfully.

This is the Word of God. It has been preached to you, the people of God, and the people of God responded: Amen!