



A Sermon delivered by Rev. Douglas S. Stivison
at the Community Service of Thanksgiving
November 22, 2009

First Congregational United Church of Christ
Haworth, New Jersey

To Ask the Lord's Blessing

Please look around you tonight. See how many familiar faces you recognize from your home congregation and neighborhoods and also how many faces that you do not recognize. The rest of the year we worship in our own familiar sanctuaries, with our own worship leaders, with our own much-loved music books and prayer books. Some of us here tonight even worship in our own language other than English.

Yet here we are, one evening out of the entire year, together! And what has brought us all together this night? How is it that members of 11 separate congregations are here? How is it that we are sitting in pews next to people, in many cases, with whom we have never worshipped before? What brings us together despite the fact that we don't know the names or the faith traditions of the person sitting behind us and in front of us?

We are not here to rally for one position or another in the divisive issues of the day. For those of us who embrace Sunday as the day for Sabbath worship, what has led us to think that we have not had sufficient worship time today? And for those who recognize a different day of the week as the Sabbath, why are we gathered for worship on a day that is neither a holy day nor the Sabbath?

Gratitude.

Gratitude brings us out tonight. A sense of thankfulness that fills us from our toes to our heads and a sense of gratitude that unites us. We come with a wonderful awareness that we share the same God who blesses each and every one of us alike.

We come from different congregations and traditions. We observe the Sabbath on different days, we pray in English and Hebrew and Korean and Spanish and Italian. On any of the important social and political issues of the day — health care, gender equality, abortion, the role of government, the path to peace in the Middle East, we probably represent a very wide range of views.

Yet despite these differences, we are all gathered here this evening under the same roof, and praying to the same God. And I venture to say that every one of us here tonight learned as children God's greatest commandment—to love the Lord our God with all our heart and all our soul and all our might. Some of us learned this from the law as recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures, Deuteronomy in the five books of Moses.

Others of us learned precisely this same commandment in the Christian Gospels, as Jesus quotes in the Gospels of Luke and Mark. Some of us memorized it as a basic question in our Baltimore and Westminster catechisms. But in Hebrew or English, whether we learned it in the words of Moses or the words of Jesus, we all share the understanding that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God with all our heart and all our soul and all our might.

And we are showing that love of our creator here tonight. We are demonstrating that love of the source of all of our blessings, tonight. We are demonstrating that love in prayer, in reflection, in song, and in action.

For you see, we might have been taught this lesson in Hebrew School, Sunday School, or Catechism Class; but we had to absorb the lesson into our being and to make it a part of our lives. We had to transform the lesson we were taught into the life we lead every day. We might have been taught that we are supposed to love our God, but nobody can actually teach us to love our God. Loving our creator is not a learned process, but comes from inside of us as our reaction to having first received God's love and then responding to that love. And every one of us came here tonight because throughout our lives we have experienced God's love and we have developed a deep, deep need to respond to this love. We have a compelling need to give thanks to our Creator, for the blessings with which we are showered each and every day of our lives. To be thankful to God for the people in our lives who love us, who make our lives richer by their presence, who bless us by sharing our lives.

We are thankful, too, to our Creator for our individual gifts as well – and again, the scripture that all of us share reminds us that in God's infinite wisdom we are each individuals with different gifts. We are builders and teachers, we are preachers and musicians, we are nurturers and administrators, we story tellers and athletes, we are doers and we are dreamers. We possess different talents and gifts, but we all know that the source of our individual gifts is God, the same source of my gifts is the source of your gifts as well. And we are profoundly and deeply grateful for the gifts of spirit and talent, of words and personality, of nimbleness and creativity that is each of us. *Uniquely* each of us.

And we are thankful, too, for God's material benefits — many of which set us apart from so many people around the world. We are thankful for enough to eat when so many in the world are hungry. We are thankful for comfortable homes when so many others are homeless or are forced to live in terrible squalor. We are thankful for the freedom to worship freely and openly without fear or coercion, a freedom that is denied to millions of people around the globe. We are grateful for the freedom to speak freely on the issues that matter to us without fear of the knock on the door by the secret police.

We are individually grateful people, and we gather tonight as a single, grateful *family*. We gather as a family that this evening is bound together by a shared sense of gratitude that is stronger than any of our differences of politics or religious tradition. Tonight, what unites us overtakes what might separate us.

I am certain that every one of us loves our own congregation. Each of us is uplifted and moved by our familiar prayers, and songs, rituals, and traditions. Our unique religious traditions comfort us the way our old family stories also comfort us. We treasure them. They help define who we are. We dare not lose them or forget them.

But tonight we also turn to one God, as one universal family, with a common prayer – to thank our creator for all of our blessings...and to remind ourselves that among God's countless blessings are the blessings of old friendships that we renew tonight, and new friendships that we form tonight.

In the words of the great Thanksgiving anthem, we have indeed gathered together.

We have indeed gathered to ask God's blessing,

We have indeed gathered to sing God's praises,

And, oh yes my friends, you and I have gathered in the assurance that our God forgets not God's own.