

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Thursday, November 23, 2011
Thanksgiving Eve Service**

OCCUPY THANKSGIVING

Colossians 3:12-17

It has been going on for more than two months now. It began when a group of protesters moved into New York's Zuccotti Park near Wall Street on September 17. Many of them literally moved into the park, creating a tent city until they were forced out by police just a week ago, and the park was closed to overnight use by the occupiers. You know what I'm talking about. I'm talking about Occupy Wall Street and the larger Occupy Movement, which quickly spread to our nation's capital and has now spread to more than one thousand cities in America and elsewhere in the world. Here in D. C., protesters have been occupying McPherson Square (just north of the White House) and Freedom Plaza (off Pennsylvania Avenue between the White House and the U. S. Capitol).

While not everyone in the Occupy Movement is singing from the same sheet of music, and the message of the movement is not always clear or consistent, in general the protesters are standing up against what they perceive to be social, economic and political inequalities in our society that are unjust. The Occupy Movement says it is standing up and speaking out on behalf of the 99% of us who are being exploited by the 1% who control so much of the wealth and political power here in America. Their motto is "We are the 99%." They want more and better jobs for those seeking them, a more equal distribution of wealth (i.e., the redistribution of wealth through tax policy and other regulations), banking reforms, and the reduction of corporate influence in politics.

As far as I can tell, that is what the Occupy Movement is about. You may be for it or against it. You may agree or disagree with their concerns and demands. I'm not here to take a political position.

As Christians, though, I do think there is something we can learn from the Occupy Movement. I think this idea of claiming space of our own and occupying it is a concept we can transfer to our understanding of the life that is ours in Christ and of the kind of life God wants us to live.

A while back, in one of the messages on grace, I talked about Graceland, which is the name of Elvis Presley's estate in Memphis. Graceland is a place you can visit the next time you're in Memphis. Lots and lots of people do it every year. For Christians, though, "Graceland" is not a place we can visit from time to time. "Graceland" is where we live. We live in the land of grace. "Graceland" is our home. We worship the God of all grace (1 Peter 5:10). We are saved by grace and grace alone (Ephesians 2:8-9). We are kept by grace. Sustained by grace. Protected and preserved by grace. 'Tis grace has brought us safe thus far, and grace will lead us home (John Newton, *Amazing Grace*).

To put it another way, we occupy the land of grace. It is where we live by the grace of God. It is our home through the saving death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, on the cross for us. If you have put your faith in Jesus Christ and what He did to secure your salvation – to forgive your sins and to restore you to a right relationship with God – then “Graceland” is your home. We occupy “Graceland.” No one has the power or the right to evict us from “Graceland,” because “Graceland” belongs to God, and so do we. Amazing grace is what God has shown us, and what He shows us day after day. Maybe we should start a movement and call it “Occupy Grace.”

Or maybe we should start a movement and call it “Occupy Thanksgiving.” Which is to say, maybe we should recognize that Thanksgiving should be much more than a holiday we celebrate once a year. That we have a special day set aside as a nation to give thanks to God for all the blessings of His grace and favor is a wonderful thing. It is good and right to count our blessings and give thanks to God on Thanksgiving Day. It is good and right to give thanks to God for the blessing of a national day of Thanksgiving. But, to state what is intuitively obvious, giving thanks to God is not intended to be a once-a-year event. Giving thanks is not simply something we *do*. Thankful is what we are to *be*. Thankfulness is meant to be a *way of life*.

Notice what Paul says in Colossians 3:15. Having put on the new clothes of a redeemed, renewed, Christ-like character, of which Paul speaks in verses 12-14 – the garments of grace, if you will – Paul urges the Christians in Colosse to let the peace of Christ rule as the arbiter or umpire in the attitudes of their hearts and in their relationships with one another, in order to sustain and even strengthen their unity in the church. Then Paul says, *kai eucharistoi ginesthe*. “And be thankful.” Let thankfulness be a way of life. Occupy Thanksgiving. Don’t just go there once a year on the fourth Thursday in November. Don’t just visit on occasion. Make it your home. *Be* thankful. Plant the seeds of thankfulness in your mind and heart by counting your blessings, by making a list of things for which you are thankful, and cultivate an attitude of gratitude in your life. Every day, in any and every circumstance in your life, find something for which you can be thankful.

Maybe you know the story about Corrie Ten Boom and her sister Betsy, who had been arrested for hiding Jews from the Nazis during World War II. Corrie tells this story in her book *The Hiding Place*. The two sisters were sent to Ravensbruck concentration camp, where they were placed in an overcrowded barracks that was infested with fleas. One day they read in their tattered Bible the exhortation in 1 Thessalonians 5 to ... what? “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (5:16-18). Good verses to memorize.

Betsy said to her sister: “Corrie, we’ve got to give thanks for this barracks and even for these fleas.”

Corrie replied: “No way am I going to thank God for fleas.” But Betsy prevailed, and they did thank God. Even for the fleas.

In the months that followed, their barracks was left relatively free from inspection by the guards, so they could read and study the Bible, talk openly about God's Word, and even pray in the barracks. It was their only place of refuge. Several months later they learned that the reason the guards never came into their barracks were because of those blasted fleas.

Isn't that wild! Maybe you're dealing with some kind of "fleas," some annoyance, some irritant, some disadvantage, some hardship, some hindrance, some situation that is far from what you think is ideal, but God is working behind the scenes in your very circumstances to bless you in ways you can't see right now. Giving thanks to God for fleas, or for any trouble we face in life, doesn't come naturally. But when thankfulness is your way of life, when you plant your flag in the land of gratitude, when you occupy Thanksgiving, then you can give thanks to God *in all circumstances*, as the Bible says, trusting God for His grace and goodness in the midst of the hardships and disappointments that are part of life in this world.

By all outward appearances, as you likely know, there wasn't a whole lot for which to be thankful when the Pilgrims, who had landed at Plymouth, Massachusetts in December 1620, sat down for the first Thanksgiving meal with the Wampanoag Indians in November 1621. The Pilgrims' first winter in America had been devastating. (We could have told them that arriving in Massachusetts in December was not such a hot idea.) To say that first year was difficult is an understatement of the highest order. Half of the original group died the first year. Some of the Pilgrims, during that first year, came to a point where they were ready to throw in the towel and go back to England. They had even boarded a ship, and were about to depart when they saw another ship approaching the harbor. The arriving ship carried much-needed food and medical supplies, giving the Pilgrims enough hope to remain in the New World and to keep going in the midst of hardships we can barely imagine. And what did they do? They marked their first harvest in America with a feast of Thanksgiving to God for His benevolence and sustaining grace. And they invited their Native American friends, the Wampanoags, to join them in their Thanksgiving feast.

As difficult as life was for them, those first Pilgrims chose to be thankful. They made a conscious choice to give thanks. They took to heart the exhortation in the Bible to "always (give) thanks to God for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 5:20). They made a decision to occupy Thanksgiving. They made the land of thankfulness their home.

This is obviously more easily said than done, but the gospel truth (it is both true and it is really good news) is that God does not want us to allow our circumstances, regardless of the fiery trial through which we may have to go, to dislodge us from our heart's home in the land of thankfulness. Do fiery trials come? Absolutely. Will each of us experience hardships of some kind that we would prefer to avoid in this life? Count on it. Will we be tempted at some point to abandon the land of thankfulness and occupy the land of grumbling or complaining or bitterness instead? Maybe.

Maybe you're feeling the heat of some fiery trial right now. Maybe you're dealing with a hardship of some kind that is harder than you ever imagined. Maybe you're finding it is not so easy to *be thankful* and to *occupy Thanksgiving* as a way of life.

I just want to tell you that you *can* let the peace of Christ rule in your heart. You *can* have the peace of God in your life. Whatever may cause you anxiety or distress or grief in your heart, give it to God. Entrust it to God. You probably already know what the Bible says in Philippians 4:6-7: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything” – notice the linguistic power of the juxtaposition of the words ‘anything’ and ‘everything’ – “by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving” (*meta eucharistia*) “present your requests to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” The God who governs our lives in His wisdom and love, and grants to us the blessings of His grace, mercy and peace, has given us a home in the land of thankfulness. *Be thankful*. If *thankful* is what we *are*, then *thanksgiving* is what will flow from our lips and from our hearts. *People of God, let us occupy Thanksgiving!* Find a quiet moment, a quiet half-hour, perhaps, and make a list of the things, people, relationships, blessings in your life for which you’re thankful. I made a list – perhaps I should say, I started to make a list – last week when I was away at a Pastors’ Conference in New York. It is not complete by any stretch of the imagination. But it is a good start.

Never buy into the lie that when life is hard, or when the barracks of your life is infested with fleas, there is little or nothing for which to be thankful. Listen to this, and take heart:

Martin Rinkart was a German pastor in the walled town of Eilenburg during the terrible suffering of the Thirty Years’ War of 1618-1648. Eilenburg became a refuge for the surrounding area, but it became terribly overcrowded. Those who sought refuge were ravaged by disease and hunger. At the beginning of 1637, the year of the Great Pestilence, there were four ministers in Eilenburg. One left to go to a healthier area, and could not be persuaded to return. Pastor Rinkart officiated at the funerals of the other two ministers. As the only minister left, he conducted funerals for as many as 40 to 50 persons a day – nearly 4,500 in all. That May, his wife died.

Though his world was dominated by death, Martin Rinkart led the Occupy Thanksgiving Movement of his day. With God’s help, he chose to live in the land of thankfulness, because, I think, he knew that though it must have often appeared otherwise, he lived in the land of grace. He wrote this prayer to teach his children:

Now thank we all our God
With hearts and hands and voices;
Who wondrous things has done,
In whom this world rejoices.
Who from our mother’s arms
Has led us on our way
With countless gifts of love
And still is ours today.

Let’s occupy Thanksgiving tonight, tomorrow, and always. Lord, let it be so.