

# THANKSGIVING 2021

## Focus on Offering a Grateful Heart

This year, let's thank God for His mercy – His mercy in sending us His Son to be our Sin-bearer; His mercy in adopting us as His children and making us members of His Church. I am not suggesting that we ignore the gracious rain, the glorious sunshine and the abundant harvest that He has provided. But let's not restrict Thanksgiving to the natural and physical

things that make us comfortable. It's too easy to say "We live in the best place in the world!" and sit down to a feast, while so many struggle to live. Sure, let's get the family together, and let's eat; but let the focus be on God's goodness and faithfulness in Christ. If the harvest had been defective, we are still called to be thankful. "Rejoice always," wrote St. Paul "pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." (1 Thessalonians 5.16-18)



As has been our custom, we will once again extend Thanksgiving to two Sundays. On October 3<sup>rd</sup> let's praise God especially for the harvest; and on October 12<sup>th</sup> let's thank Him for His blessings to us as a nation. As we look towards our Thanksgiving Festival, I would like to share these thoughts with you:

**On masks and vaccinations:** If you read this section, please read the words and don't jump to conclusions. Don't read what is not here. I am double-vaccinated. Both shots were of the Pfizer-BioNTech brand. I felt that it would be helpful in getting me access to the places I need to go as your Priest and Rector. That said, I can understand why some people have chosen otherwise. For some, fear is a factor. For others, vaccines produced from **cell lines** of 40 year-old aborted fetuses goes against their conscience. For others, there are concerns about government power and control.

On the latter, I believe there *are* some mixed messages from government – things that do not add up. For example, as a society we are free to:

- a. smoke marijuana for recreational use;
- b. abort unborn babies as a life-style choice;
- c. decide when and how we will die; and
- d. change our gender and identity.

These are all examples of the extent of our individual freedoms. And yet, mandatory vaccination seems to contravene our individual freedom.

As Christians grapple with this issue, I offer these three points for consideration: **first**, the Church building is not a public place. The public may enter, but as a Congregation, we are not sponsored by the government. **Second**, our mission is God-given. The commands for us to love and care for one another; to bear one another's burdens; and to pray for our enemies are from the Lord, not the government. **Third**, the Bible says, "*Let every person be subject to the governing*

*authorities.*” (Romans 13.1). Why? Because “*There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.*” The point is, a bad government is better than no government at all. So, for some, getting vaccinated is a civic duty.

In the end, whether vaccinated or not, every Christian is commanded to show compassion and concern for their neighbor. This is where masks, physical distance and sanitizer come in. Because they have proven to be effective in slowing the spread of COVID-19, they are a means for us to demonstrate love and concern for each other.

Obviously, we are not the first to have to deal with a divisive controversy in the Church. St. Paul addressed an issue about whether it was okay for Christians to eat meat that had been offered to idols. One commentator describes the situation as follows: “In Corinth at the time, most meat available had been used as part of temple sacrifices. So Corinthian Christians were wondering if it was okay to eat that meat, whether they purchased it in a market or were dining with non-Christian friends. For some new Christians, eating meat that had been sacrificed to an idol would have been difficult. (Therefore), Paul said that if mature Christians exercised their ‘rights’ and ate the meat (knowing that idols have no life or power) they could “*become a stumbling block to the weak*”. And, that, would be a “*sin against Christ*” (1 Corinthians 8.12).

“Paul gives the Corinthians, and us, a basic template (for responding to controversies in the Church): *put others first*. Let your conscience be guided by whatever is best for your brother or sister in Christ. Throughout First Corinthians, Paul makes this point that we are to act in love, care for others, and live in the freedom of Christ that allows us to put others first.” (from ‘She Reads Truth’ by Melanie Rainer)

***For me, there are two things worth “going to the wall over”. First, the government should not attempt to restrict the access of conscientious objectors to the Church building or its ministrations. Second, Christians must do all we can not to wound the conscience of our sister or brother. During the pandemic, that means wearing a mask, and following proper hand hygiene.***

We all know that there are a myriad of opinions on the Church’s response to the pandemic. There is lots to divide us, if we let it. But, in Christ, there is more to unite us. So, this Thanksgiving, let us begin with Him. Let us focus on His gift to us of Himself and of His Church. Then, everything else will fall into place.

*“Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you”. (St. Matthew 6.33)*

Happy Thanksgiving!

*Chris VanBuskirk +*

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