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## “The Heart of the Matter”

A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

**Christ the King Sunday**

**November 21, 2010**

**Deut. 26:1–11; Lk. 9:10–17**

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*We come here this morning, O God, with hearts full of gratitude. We thank you for all blessings of our life, for this congregation, for the freedom to gather here and to practice our faith. Now bless us with your grace so that we may hear the Word you have for us today. Startle us again with your truth, mercy and love, in Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose gracious name we pray. Amen.*

One of the most influential American authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was Kurt Vonnegut. He was a favorite of mine in college and in seminary. When someone asked him how he wanted his epitaph to read, he said, “The only proof he ever needed of the existence of God was music.” In his writings, he gave us insight into life and the world around us. His classic novel *Slaughterhouse Five* was written out of his experience as a POW in World War II, incarcerated in a slaughterhouse five stories beneath street level during the Allied firebombing of Dresden. He and a few other prisoners emerged the next day to see the utter devastation, no life moving, buildings burned to the ground as far as the eye could see. His writing thereafter contained a poignant appreciation for the gift of human life, the idiosyncrasies, the peculiarities and oddities, the simple uniqueness of every human life.

Towards the end of his life, he went around to colleges and universities, making presentations. He would tell the story about his father’s kid brother, Uncle Alex.

He was a childless graduate of Harvard who was an honest life insurance salesman in Indianapolis, Indiana. He was well-read and wise. His principal complaint about other human beings was that they always noticed when things were not good, but seldom noticed the good. Vonnegut wrote: “When we were drinking lemonade under an apple tree in the summer, say, and talking lazily about this and that, almost buzzing like honeybees, Uncle Alex would suddenly interrupt the agreeable blather to exclaim, ‘If this isn’t [good], I don’t know what is.’”<sup>1</sup>

And then Vonnegut did an extraordinary thing. He asked the students if they ever had a person who made their life better, who made them happier to be alive, prouder to be a human being, more content with themselves than they previously believed possible. Nearly every student raised a hand. “Now please say the name of that person out loud to someone sitting or standing near you.” When the chorus of all those voices died down, he said, “All done? ‘If this isn’t [good], I don’t know what is.’”

How very much there is for which to be grateful! How very much goodness and grace and happiness is given to us and how easy it is to hurry through the days of our lives: busy, preoccupied, overscheduled, overburdened, and to miss it. And so I understand why more and more people tell me that Thanksgiving is their favorite holiday of the year. No gifts to buy, no parties, no holiday rush, no busy schedule, a meal with loved ones and dear friends, and a simple reminder of how blessed we are to be alive.

*If this isn’t good, I don’t know what is.*

It is also a very ecumenical holiday. You can wish anyone a Happy Thanksgiving. You don’t have to worry about their faith tradition, whether they are a believer or a non-believer. In fact, it is one of the ways we affirm that we are all children of God. All of us, red, yellow, black, and white; short, tall, young, and old: children of a gracious God.

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<sup>1</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man Without a Country* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), p. 132.

Gratitude is the heart of the matter. Presbyterian theologian Robert McAfee Brown used to say that “the distinctive word in the Christian vocabulary is *grace*,” and there is also a word that describes the response we are called to make: that word is *gratitude*. Brown went on to say that his favorite hymn in the Presbyterian Hymnal was, “Now Thank We All Our God.” It was the best, all-purpose hymn, good for every occasion. I think Robert McAfee Brown got it right.

Gratitude is the heart of the matter, and is, after all, at the very heart of our faith, the fundamental Christian emotion. Gratitude is the basic human response to the goodness of life, to the mercy, love and grace of God made known to us in Jesus Christ. It is our response to God’s undeserved and unconditional love. At the heart of Christian experience and teaching is not guilt, as we have sometimes been taught; not obligation, as we occasionally conclude and teach; but the heart of the matter is gratitude, pure and simple: gratitude for God’s grace, gratitude because all of life, *all of it*, is a gift we did not earn but were given.

Norman Mailer was another great American author: irascible, brilliant, married six times, irreverent. He had the audacity enough to write a book about Jesus in the first person singular, *The Gospel according to the Son*. One of the last books he published was *On God: An Uncommon Conversation*. It’s an extended interview actually, and in the introduction, Mailer wrote, “I have spent the last fifty years trying to contemplate the nature of God. . . . My pride in the first thirty years of my life was to be an atheist—how much more difficult and honorable I then considered that to be, rather than having a belief in an almighty divinity. . . . It took a good number of years to recognize that I did believe in God, that I believed there is a divine presence in existence.” God, Mailer said, he had come to visualize as an artist, not a law giver: “I see God as a Creator, the greatest artist.”

And now the scientists are adding their voices. A few years ago, the Templeton Foundation published a book of stunning color photographs of outer space taken through the Hubble telescope, *The Hand of God: Thoughts and Images Reflecting the Spirit of the Universe*. Writers and poets wrote about the fact that God could be experienced in the beauty of the creation: beautiful beyond our imagining.

And that is the way the Apostles Creed begins:

“I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.” God made the world, and when he made it over and over again in that story in Genesis, the writer says, “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31).

There is a story about the goodness of God and the abundance of what God has given us. It is the story we read in the Gospel this morning. At the end of a long day of teaching and healing, the crowd that followed Jesus wherever he went is still there. It is evening, people are getting hungry, and the disciples say, “Send them away. We don’t have enough.” Jesus said to them, “You feed them.” “Impossible,” they said, “we virtually have no food, just barely enough for ourselves.” Five loaves and two fish. Then Jesus sat them down, he took the loaves and the fish, he blessed them, broke them, and gave them. Does that sound familiar? The bread is broken after it has been blessed. It’s a Eucharistic act. All who ate were filled. There was enough for all, more than enough. Twelve baskets of leftovers. Many believe it symbolized the twelve tribes of Israel. Enough for everyone, an abundance.

Walter Brueggemann says, “The feeding of the multitudes . . . is an example of the new world coming into being through God. . . . When Jesus fed the hungry crowd, he demonstrated that the world is filled with abundance and freighted with generosity. If bread is broken and shared, there is enough for all. . . . The creation is infused with the Creator’s generosity, and we can find practices, procedures, and institutions that allow that generosity to work” (“The Liturgy of Abundance, Myth of Scarcity,” *Christian Century*, 24 March 1999).

There is another litany going around to counter the litany of abundance that God has made a good world. There is a litany of scarcity. There is not enough, and therefore, we must get what we can for ourselves and hoard it.

Jesus demonstrates in this act of blessing, breaking, and distributing the bread that the God who created the world of good says to us over and over again, “There is enough.” Children should not go to sleep hungry in the city of Durham, or for any

city for that matter. They should not be deprived of a good education. They should not be deprived of love. There is enough for all God's children.

You see, my friends, gratitude is more than an emotion. It is more than an attitude. Gratitude is a worldview, a way of looking at and living in the world. Rabbi Harold Kushner, commenting on that wonderful phrase in the Twenty-Third Psalm: "My cup runneth over," says, "Gratitude is more than remembering to mumble 'thank you.' It's more than a ritual of politeness. Gratitude is a way of looking at the world that does not change the facts of your life but has the power to make your life more enjoyable."

Gratitude can be expressed even in the midst of adversity and trouble. It always interested me that the hymn that we love and that Robert McAfee Brown held up for us, "Now Thank We All Our God," was written in the midst of a horrible plague. People were dying, much like they are today in Haiti. A Lutheran pastor, Martin Rinkart, gave thanks to God in extremely difficult times. Can we do the same? Can we look at a situation where the disciples say there is not enough, and hear our Lord say, "You feed them. Take the bread, break it, and serve it."

My friends, the one who taught us how to live grateful lives is the one we call our Lord. He is the one who we are committed to follow. In his humble service, he gives of himself for the sake of the world—this world, a world in which people blow each other up and say mean and ugly things about each other, a world where the innocent suffer, a world where life is not fair. He still dares to lay down his life for that world, and he asks us, those who follow him, to do the same. On the last Sunday of the year, we celebrate His Lordship. This was the first Christian affirmation of faith: "Jesus is Lord." And down through the centuries, Christians have dared to continue to make this claim. In the face of emperors, whether it be the Roman Emperor or Adolf Hitler, whoever says that they are Lord, the church has had the audacity, the courage to say, "No, you're not Lord. Jesus is Lord." That humble, Jewish carpenter's son who took bread, blessed it, broke it, and shared it.

You know what comforts me? I take comfort in this affirmation:, "Jesus is Lord. He has been Lord from the beginning, and he will be Lord at the end. Even now,

He is Lord.” This is the One whose presence we await in Advent: the One who is still breaking bread.

Friday I went to the Community Café where Maxie Honeycutt, Sarah Todd, and Phyllis Verhey from this church were serving lunches. There were a lot of people in the lunch line who were hungry. You know what is amazing to me? Every time I go to the Community Café, the people standing in line are grateful. They don’t take their lunch for granted. They pray the prayer, “Give us this day our daily bread” in a very personal way, so when someone hands them bread, they say, “Thank you.” And I came to realize they weren’t necessarily saying “thank you” to me. They were saying it to the One who created life and made enough for all of us so we are to share it. They don’t take it for granted, and their gratitude appears to me to be deeply genuine.

Let it be so with us. Let it be so during this season of Thanksgiving as we gather to give our thanks for the Lordship of Jesus Christ, “who though he was rich, for our sake, he became poor,” that through his poverty, our lives might be enriched.

If that isn’t good, I don’t know what is. Amen.