



**“GIVE THANKS!”**

***Thanksgiving/Dedication Sunday Sermon, Pilgrim UCC 11/21/10***

***Rev. Janet Boyd Weidler***

*Text: “First Fruits: “We Bring Our Best to God” (Based on Deuteronomy 26:1-11)*

*When the people of Israel had settled in the land that God had provided, there was a ritual that they performed every year to remember their story. Every year they took some of the first fruits of all that had produced from the soil of the land and put them in baskets. They would then process together to the sacred gathering place say these words before the priest:*

*A wandering, landless Aramean was my ancestor who with all my ancestors went down into Egypt and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians treated us badly and made us suffer, making us work hard. Then we cried out to the God of our ancestors, who heard our voice and saw our misery, toil, and oppression. God rescued us and brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and with great and wonderful signs and miracles. God brought us to this place- this beautiful land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Now we bring the first fruits of the soil that you, O God have provided.*

*After the offering of the first fruits of the harvest, the Israelites would have a great feast. Everyone was invited- even the refugees and immigrants and strangers that lived in God’s land together. All rejoiced in the good things that God had provided.*

*As the Israelites brought the first fruits of the harvest to God, we also are bringing today the “first fruits” of our labors and of ourselves to dedicate to God’s work in this church.*

*Not the leftovers,*

*not the second best,*

*not what is convenient for us,*

*but the first part,*

*the best portion,*

*intentionally saved,*

*deliberately put aside,*

*sacrificed,*

*to honor God, .....and to help us remember that all we have, everything we own, every blessing we enjoy comes from God. Returning a portion of the abundant gifts God has given us, we bring no less than our best to God.*

*(Seasons of the Spirit, adapted)*

Some years ago, famous people from all over the world were polled by a magazine which asked them the question “if you could be granted one wish that will come true right now, what would that be?”

There were some very interesting responses, but one response impressed the magazine’s editors so much that they commented on it. That response was this: **“I wish that I could be given an even greater ability to appreciate all that I already have.”**



I like that- it's a good thing to wish for, a good thing to strive for: being able to recognize all the blessings in our lives, to slow down enough to truly appreciate them, and to take the time to say thank you- to

God and one another! Naming- and Embracing and Celebrating all God's gifts- and giving thanks for all those gifts- can transform our very being and the way we occupy our space in the world. The yellow sheet you all have- "Harvest of Gifts"- is an example of naming and celebrating and giving thanks for all the gifts among us all here at Pilgrim. \* (See "Harvest of Gifts listing appended to sermon)

The German theologian and mystic, Meister Eckhart, once said: "If the only prayer you said in your whole life was, "thank you," that would be enough." There's a lot of wisdom in that!

When I think about Pilgrim church, that prayer "Thank you" is the first thing that comes to mind. The small group meetings we've had over the last month have really brought that home - it's been wonderful to gather around tables and in living rooms and hear the different stories of how different ones came to Pilgrim and what people are most thankful for about this church. I wish you could all have been to all the groups - I feel incredibly blessed to have been able to do just that- I wouldn't trade that for anything- I just wish you all could have been there! But here's the next best thing- I want to give you a sampling of what people said as we shared why Pilgrim is important to us and why we care about this church.

The youth of the church were the first group to meet- here are a couple of comments that I remember from our younger members:

- All the people here care about each other and respect each other
- Pilgrim is accepting of different kinds of people and not judgmental
- We go on neat trips

And the adults had lots to say as well-

- People are real here, there's not a lot of posturing and judging
- It's the people of Pilgrim.
- Once I came to Pilgrim and found that they let you do your own thinking, I was hooked
- We're welcoming here but without being pushy or overbearing
- Pilgrim is an oasis church that provides a place of safety and nurture for pilgrims on life's journey
- I stay here because of the wonderful people, the excellent music, and the fact that here I am well-accepted and loved
- I'm here because I want to be part of a church that works for justice and inclusivity.
- I like the openness, the emphasis on acceptance/affirmation of all people, and the emphasis on that in the liturgy
- It's important that Pilgrim is part of a larger denomination with liberal views- not only are we open & affirming and justice-seeking as a congregation, but we are part of whole larger denomination that supports us and challenges us to do even more
- The key thing about Pilgrim is its radical hospitality- it's what we try to do all the time and not just at church
- I like that Pilgrim welcomes everybody and tries to see the good in everyone



- I can be myself; I feel welcomed and at home here;
- Everyone is kind, accepting, and genuinely concerned about others- and the sermons aren't fire and brimstone!
- Pilgrim has given me a newfound respect for Christianity; it has restored my hope for the Christian faith
- Pilgrim is a source of hope for positive change
- There is consistency here between what people preach and what people do
- Pilgrim was the first church that was really was what I believe a Christian church should be
- We don't have to say things we don't believe
- It's not about appearances here
- The diversity of Pilgrim is a strength; opposing opinions are good
- Pilgrim blends the traditional with what is more modern and liberal in a good way
- The most important thing in human relationships is love and that's what I see at Pilgrim
- I like being with the intelligent, open-minded people here
- I don't have to dress up
- Pilgrim is open-minded and open-hearted; there's a place for all of us
- The denominational piece of Pilgrim is important- being part of a denomination that is progressive
- I like Pilgrim's liberal, open & affirming theology and the caring people
- I like the smaller size, the intelligent, open-minded people and the informality
- Pilgrim has given me the freedom to be a seeker and a searcher- to be who I am, yet still be a part of a community

What a great testimony to what this church means in people's lives!

When you sit down and really think about what this church means and why we are here and how our ministry touches and transforms lives, it seems the most natural thing in the world to give thanks- to give ourselves and our gifts so we can keep being who we are, living out the radical hospitality of the gospel within and beyond these walls.

There was also much wonderful sharing about hopes and dreams for this church and a lot of energy for making those dreams a reality. Reaching out more into the community, starting new social justice ministries, cultivating and growing in our diversity, continuing to give priority to social action and the nurture of our children, having some more classes and small groups, being a voice for an alternative Christianity in Birmingham, spreading our message of inclusivity and forward-thinking faith, growing not because we need more bodies but because there are people out there who are seeking the life-transforming gospel this church strives to embody. The possibilities of what we can do - the possibilities of what God can accomplish in and through us- are infinite. And all of us together, with the enlivening power of the Spirit - have the gifts and resources to make those possibilities a reality.

The only question is, will you and I share what we have? I already know the answer to that- the answer is yes- just look at the abundant offering of gifts listed on the page of all the gifts and resources people have said they have to offer. Let's truly give our thanks to God for ALL these amazing gifts and let that thanksgiving lead us into thanks-living: to living thankfully, giving generously, sharing abundantly, of all God's gifts.



## **GIFTS WE CAN OFFER 11/10: A HARVEST OF GIFTS**

*A Compilation from Small Group Meetings & All Saints Sunday Offering of Gifts*

*\*means more than one person said this*

### **Miscellaneous**

Volunteer at anything I can do \*  
Being a helping hand in any way for the church  
Help revise Pilgrim's Constitution/Bylaws  
Get out of way & let a younger generation carry on  
Support work of spouse/partner at Pilgrim \*  
Whatever is needed  
Explore & Think About Gifts to Offer \*  
Cherish the people of Pilgrim  
Take on new jobs as time allows  
My presence and moral support; My time

### **Education/Spiritual Nurture/Worship**

Teaching/Education/Sunday Attendance  
Teach class re. Questions About Christian Faith Teach class re. World Religions  
Lead a spirituality 101 group  
Come to a new Sunday AM class on the Bible  
Bible Study  
Social Justice Study  
Sunday School class  
Attend SS or small group  
Groups/programs at times other than Sun. AM  
Facilitating small groups  
Helping with discussions on God & Life  
Helping with Kids Programs and Activities  
Work with children, 1st Sunday of the month  
Prayers for people \*\*\*; Pray for Pilgrim  
Support worship, music, education at Pilgrim  
Planning worship & updating services  
Acolyte, Liturgist, Usher  
Choir\*, Bell Choir; Music; my voice in song  
Play piano duets  
Start Music program for kids inside & outside church



### **Arts/Writing/Technology**

Creativity

Art\*; Artwork; Graphic Design\*

Make banners for sanctuary

Writing\*; Writing Stories; Proofreading

Reason, apologetics

Spread message via social media & internet

Write a Pilgrim Blog; Work on website

### **Financial**

Tithing; Pledging; Contributions/Support \*\*

Organ fund campaign; Help in church finance

### **Building/Grounds**

Furniture Selection/Placement

Spruce up Grounds

Planning how to utilize our space

Building Maintenance & Repairs

### **Outreach/Mission**

Social Justice\*/Doing Justice

Volunteer at Firehouse \*

Advocacy for GLBT youth

Reach out to area surrounding church

Social Action\* & Outreach ministry \*

Southtown Ministry contact

Being liberal voice in community

Help with recycling

Community Service; Community Volunteer

Being a good neighbor

Belief in nuclear disarmament/peace& justice for all

Help with Pennies for Peace Projects

### **Fellowship/Hospitality/Membership Growth**

Increase Fellowship

Bake; Bring refreshments

Work in kitchen \*

Provide hospitality at church and in home \*\*

Working in groups

Organizing programs/activities

Forming/Building friendships



Member Care- Send cards to congregation  
Work on Growth- building up community of faith  
Inviting friends to Pilgrim; talk re Pilgrim to friends  
Invite others to Pilgrim  
Get comma pins & and spread word re. Pilgrim  
Serve on renewal cmt with Cameron

### **Personal**

Smile; Happiness; Adoration  
My youth/attracting others to Pilgrims  
Energetic for Pilgrim; Love of people- hope for all  
Following directions  
Leadership; Organization; Dependability  
Curiosity; Faith/doubt; Experiences  
Listening; Patience \*; Love \*; Humor  
Self-awareness; Empathy; Reason, apologetics  
Fairly; Love of Nature; Pleasure of Friends  
Compassion \*/understanding  
Compassion & Resourcefulness  
Try to give all that I do to God