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**Thanksgiving Day Homily, 2008**  
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If you think about it, it's a little bit odd that our main way of giving thanks on this day is by eating.

To be sure, there are important ritual acts of Thanksgiving: the pre-dawn procession of the turkey roasters, the traditional cheek-pinching and hair-tousling of the young, with its own verbal formula: "Give your aunt a hug," to which the proper response is, "Well, look at how much you've grown!" And of course there's the traditional Thanksgiving football game, either played or watched, which immediately follows the sacred loosening of the belts.

*Giving thanks ought to spring from a thankful heart. But it actually works the other way around. Giving thanks – becoming mindful of the things for which you are grateful and of those to whom you owe thanks exercises the "thankfulness muscles" of your heart and makes them stronger.*

But the main event, of course, is the meal. And as odd as it may seem intellectually that we give thanks by feeding ourselves, that is what human beings have always done. Whenever we have something to be thankful for – a birth, a wedding, a good harvest, a victory – we call together those who share our joy, and we give thanks with a feast.

And we Christians do the same. Our Sunday gathering to share bread and wine in Jesus' name is also called "Thanksgiving," for that is exactly what the Greek word "Eucharist" means.

And we do the same things (except, in most cases, the football). We gather together, we tell old family stories, we remember those who because of distance or death can't be with us, we hug, we come to the table, we eat, we drink. And in every part of it – the gathering, the storytelling, the remembering, the meal – we remind ourselves to give thanks to God for providing the feast, to Jesus for calling us together, to the Holy Spirit for inspiring us to live as thankful people.

So how do we live as thankful people? How do we make "Eucharist" – thanksgiving – a way of life, instead of something we do once a week, or once a year? It's a particularly important question in times like these, when uncertainty and genuine hardship cause such anxiety for us, our families, our neighbors, and, these days, the whole world.

I guess the main thing is to actually *give* thanks. It's a strange thing, perhaps, but the act of giving thanks – of saying "thank you" – is more important than trying to develop a thankful heart in yourself. In fact, the act of giving thanks is the best way to dispose your heart toward thankfulness. I know that seems backwards. Giving thanks ought to spring from a thankful heart.

But it actually works the other way around. Giving thanks – becoming mindful of the things for which you are grateful and of those to whom you owe thanks exercises the “thankfulness muscles” of your heart and makes them stronger. And it has the added benefit of being something you can do even when you don’t *feel* thankful. I might say *especially* when you don’t feel thankful.

And of course the second part of giving thanks, beyond saying “thank you,” is giving. Our ancestors believed that the first tenth of everything they received was to be given back to God. Not just *a* tenth, but the *best* tenth. The ripest fruit, the fattest, healthiest animals, the plumpest grain: the stuff that goes to the Farmer’s Market instead of to the chain grocery store.

They understood that by giving to God first in order to thank God for giving to them the best of God’s creativity, passion and love, they were free to fully enjoy the rest without shame or guilt. And they knew that in lean times, the God who was always with them suffered with them, feeling their pain, weeping their tears. Giving thanks, it seems, is even more important in hard times.

And the third part of giving thanks is truly enjoying the gifts for which we are thankful. Not to do so is to dishonor the gift. The meal, the company, the God who gives them are all to be savored, relished, enjoyed, delighted in.

So today let us not only be thankful, but give thanks. Let the good food and good company and good grace of our Thanksgiving meal be at the back of your mind every time we gather for our Sunday Thanksgiving, and let the prayers and stories and the communion of our Sunday gathering be at the heart of our feast today. Remember all those to whom you owe thanks, and make an effort to thank them. And remember especially our God, to whom we owe all thanks, and try, in celebration and in daily life, in times of joy and in times of anxiety, to give thanks to God, the giver of all good things, to Jesus, both giver and gift, and to the Holy Spirit, who gives us the power and the wisdom to give thanks.

Amen.