

Thanksgiving and Thanks Living
Deuteronomy 26:1-11 John 6:25-35
November 24, 2019

In our reading from John this morning, Jesus calls out the people who had followed him, claiming they were not really interested in hearing what he had to say. They just knew he could make bread appear out of thin air. They were following him because they were hungry, but he wanted them to know that there was far more to life than the physical things that we can taste, see and feel. He wanted them to learn to trust God to satisfy the deeper longings of their lives, the deeper hungers that could not be satisfied with bread alone. But it takes trust to let go of what is right in front of us. It takes trust to offer thanks for what cannot be seen.

We all know what Thanksgiving is about. It's about gratitude. It's about being thankful for the abundance in our lives. It is also about recognizing that there is something or someone beyond ourselves who is responsible for the good in our lives. It is about thanking God for the amazing and wonderful gifts we receive every single day. But an aspect I have been thinking about is that, in Judeo-Christian terms, gratitude is actually meant to come *before* we know that there will be abundance. In fact, looking at Deuteronomy, the people were told to make their offerings as soon as they harvested *anything*. They were told to offer the very first fruits of their harvest to God, the very first tomato, the first beans, the first potato or squash. They were supposed to hand these things over to God before they even knew if they were going to get a decent crop, before they knew there would be enough to feed their family or to sell at market in order to make a living. This idea of giving to God first, can be challenging for us. We feel a whole lot more comfortable if we can first take the time to tally up what we have, figure out what we need out of that, and then give the *extra* to God.

I think this reticence of ours comes from fear – fear of not having enough. But it also comes from not really knowing how to translate our trust of God into everyday life. Just how much can we lean on God to take care of us? What should we take responsibility for and what can we safely leave up to God?

I have learned a lot about trust as well as about gratitude, from Native people. During the Parliament of World Religions, Gary and I as well as our students, got up early to experience the morning ceremonies that the Indigenous people of Canada invited us to. We arrived in the cold, rainy dawn and were smudged with the smoke of sweet grass, then invited to gather in an ever-expanding circle of sleepy people, around the fire while we waited for everything to be made ready. Prayers were said – lots of prayers. Prayers were offered in gratitude for the new day, for the fire that had burned all night and for the people who had stayed up to ensure it kept burning. Water was poured on the ground in a ceremonial way, and again, prayers of gratitude were made, this time for the waters and all that water does to ensure life for us and for the whole planet. Then each of us were given small cups of water to drink – our first water of the new day. That water felt sacred to me, as I know it was to the people making the prayers. As we took our first sips, we were reminded that we could not live without water, and in that moment the truth of that really came home to me. There was more to the morning ritual, but what stays with me is the powerful teaching that gratitude must come first, before a person takes what they need for the day – before they even take a small sip of water. It also struck me that the simple act of gratitude can change how you experience something that seems so commonplace, such as water. The centrality of gratitude really hits home when you are standing in the cold, feet wet from the soggy ground, your coat unable to hold the rain or the damp at bay. In my world, that would be grounds for complaining, at the very least. But in the world of the people who called the circle together, the focus was so clearly on offering thanks that any physical discomforts they may have suffered along the

way were not even acknowledged. The lesson I learned that morning was that it is important to turn my attention away from myself, away from my own needs, at least once a day, and focus on giving thanks for what God has given me. Gratitude makes all the difference in how we see even the simplest things in our daily lives.

When we go back to the Biblical roots of Thanksgiving we are similarly challenged to give thanks to God first, before we do anything else. We start by giving thanks for *what is*, for what is right here in this moment, having only the smallest sample in our hands – one tomato, a handful of beans, a cup of water. As we give thanks for *what is*, we express our trust that there is more to come. We may have what we need in the moment, but the key to this thing called “faith” is that we also have to trust that God will provide for us in the next moment, the one that we cannot see. We need to give thanks before we have the whole picture. A big part of this has to do with trust, essentially trusting that God will give us what we need. The Hebrew people had to trust their God, Yahweh, that they would have enough food to feed their families. They had to trust that they would have enough after they made their offerings of first fruits at the Temple. They had to trust that they would have enough even if they shared what they had with others. These others included the Levites, whose job it was to take care of the Temple and therefore who didn’t have fields or crops of their own, as well as widows and children, and any immigrants or foreigners who lived with them.

This is a bit different from our usual picture of what we call the “First Thanksgiving”, when the immigrant pilgrims and the Native people indigenous to this land sat down to share a feast once the harvest was in. We picture them surrounded by abundance, by the incredible bounty of the land, a symbol of the cooperation between the immigrants and the native people. It is easier to give thanks when we know what we have, when we know that there is enough to go around. And it is easier to share when we know exactly how much we can share with others, while still setting enough aside to get ourselves through the winter. But when we offer our thanks *before* the harvest is in - in fact, when it has only just *begun*, then this has more to do with our trust than it does with giving thanks for something that is already true.

So, how does your sense of gratitude change when you know you are giving thanks for things you have not yet seen? How might it feel to share a meal with others when you are not fully certain there will be enough to get you through the winter? It is easy for us to go to a place of fear when we cannot see the outcome. It is easy for us to go to a place of protecting what we have, of not being willing to share. But Thanksgiving is really all about sharing what we have, no matter how much or how little. It is about trusting, despite all the odds, that God will take care of us and of our loved ones. It is about saying “no” to fear, no matter what we see around us that might cause us to be worried. It is about living in gratitude, and trusting that we will have what we need when we need it. Thanksgiving is about saying, “we are blessed,” even if we don’t have the evidence to prove it. And when we share what we *do have*, then there is an even greater chance that everyone will be blessed in the process.

God, we are like the crowds who came to Jesus looking for an easy meal. We are afraid of going hungry. We are not sure what tomorrow may bring and so we hold on tight, too tight, to what we have. Help us to loosen our grip, God. May we share what we have with those who need these gifts. Help us to open our hearts, God. May our hearts fill up with gratitude so that it spills out everywhere we go. You have given us so much already! This world is so beautiful, so full of rich and abundant goodness that feeds our souls. Help us to offer our thanks with every breath, before we even know what the day might bring. May we live our thanksgiving every day.