

## BEING THANKFUL

DEUTERONOMY 8:10-20      NOV 17, 2023

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The writer of our text this morning reminds the people of Israel that God had led them through forty years of the wilderness providing for them food and water and safety all while leading them to the land of abundance. A land with flowing streams, a land of wheat and barley of fig trees and pomegranates where bread and honey will be abundant. But, then he warns them that they need to be careful that they do not forget their God and fail to keep his commandments. They need to know if that do they will surely perish. They should make their thanksgiving for what God has for them into the art of ThanksLiving.

What does Thanksgiving mean to you? In the stream of holidays at the end of the year Thanksgiving seems to be the middle-child holiday that becomes more and more overshadowed by its siblings Halloween and Christmas. After all, Thanksgiving does not have the pageantry of Halloween, with its costumes, parties, and candy. Neither does it have the glitz, glamour, hustle, and bustle of Christmas, with colorful lights, frenzied shopping, and expensive gifts. However, it is interesting that many people claim Thanksgiving as their favorite holiday.

Perhaps Thanksgiving is a more peaceful time after the chaos of Halloween and before the overwhelming rush toward Christmas. Families gather during other holidays, but Thanksgiving tends to lead our thoughts to family scenes of eating together from a bountiful, beautifully decorated table and of relaxing together.

Regardless, Thanksgiving seems to be the holiday when the road leads to home. And that is good—either it leads to home or to place where you find people that make it home.

However, as we enjoy the abundant blessings of family, food, and security, we should be mindful of another road many travel that leads to poverty, homelessness, fractured families, abuse, hunger, and despair. Thanksgiving is a wonderful holiday to gather to celebrate the blessings God has given to us, but the spirit of the holiday should call us to action throughout the year. Our Thanksgiving must become “ThanksLiving.” The giving and living part of our thankfulness to God is found in compassionately serving those on the beaten path. Hebrews 13:16 urges, *“Don’t forget to do good and to share what you have because God is pleased with these kinds of sacrifices.”*

Sometimes, we become so focused on thanking God for our being the recipients of God’s blessings — and we should — that we forget the giving aspect of Thanksgiving. God has blessed us so that we may multiply God’s blessings by our giving of blessings to others.

Greg Paul is a pastor and member of Sanctuary (Toronto), a ministry where the wealthy and poor share their experiences and resources daily and care for the most excluded people in the city.

He related this day when the figures standing at the far end of the city park he was about to enter, lurking just outside the bright cone of a streetlight, had the hulking, rounded look acquired by homeless people wearing many layers of clothing. He was not concerned because he assumed he would know the two people, and so personal safety never crossed his mind. As I said, he was a pastor and member of the Sanctuary community, which makes a particular point of embracing people who are, as we say, *“street-involved.”* In other words, most of the *“bad guys”* are my friends,” he said. As it turned out, these two were men he had known for years. It wouldn’t be a stretch to say that they loved each other like brothers—brothers in a large, fractious, family where addictions and violence are too common.

They stood there in the cold dark bantering about nothing in particular. His pals were sober and at

ease. They weren't in a rush to be anywhere else; that little park was, in effect, their living room, and apart from some of the more colorful expressions, the tenor of the conversation was pretty much what you'd hear at a neighborhood dinner party.

After a few minutes, Pastor Paul said he had to go. One of his friends wanted to know where he was going? It was ten o'clock at night; in what I'm sure must have been an isn't-it-obvious tone of voice, He said, "Home. I'm going home."

His street brother gave him a cool look and said, "Must be nice."

"It is," he replied, after a short, awkward pause.

His brother's coolness evaporated. He stepped forward, gave him a hug, and told him to go on home and have a good evening. And he meant it.

When we stand in another's shoes, we gain the capacity for perspective. Sometimes, it's difficult to see things when you're right up close to them and seeing them from the same angle you always do. To give thanks for something you've never had, you might need to view your life from that other perspective. Perhaps you'll give thanks because diseases that have affected people all over the world for hundreds of years won't affect you because you were inoculated as a baby. Perhaps you'll give thanks because you've never known a time when your stomach was so empty for so long that you forgot how to be hungry. Perhaps you'll give thanks because every time you slept outside in your life, you did so because you chose to – and you always had s'mores after the campfire died down.

For the next few moments, I invite you to think of something you've never experienced, something you don't want to experience because it is unhealthy or degrading or worse. Now thank God that this thing has never happened to you. But don't stop there. Recognize that the thing-that-has-never-been—always is happening somewhere in the world – maybe next door, or a few blocks away, or across an ocean. How can you help make that thing go from an alwaysis to a never again?

Rev. Paul said, "When I arrived home after bumping into my homeless friends, I stood for a minute beside my car (a vintage Corolla, but still, a car), listening to the ticking of the engine as it cooled, and looking at the windows of our house, glowing brightly in the night. Recalling the gracious blessing of my street brother, I was loosed for a moment from taking for granted all I possess, made aware of the enormous wealth of material and relationship that is mine. It was, for that moment at least, enough. I gave thanks. And committed myself, with fresh conviction, to seeking justice and blessing for my homeless brothers and sisters."

This week we celebrate a National Holiday. In fact, there are many other countries that have similar annual holidays that celebrate the successful harvest of their farmers.

But the faith we share invites us not only to a national reminder that we should be thankful, but also a call to adjust our lives in such a way that we are actually engaged in not just Thanksgiving but "Thanks-Living." It asks that we find thanksgiving everywhere we look.

Do you remember these scriptures?

The first is one found in the book of Psalms chapter 65.

*Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion by awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation; you are the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas. By your strength you established the mountains; you are girded with might. You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of the waves, the tumult of the people. Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs; you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy. You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it. You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth. The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for*

joy.

The Psalmist suggests that there are things around every day for which we could be thankful.

And these words:

*“Give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name; make known among the nations what he has done. Bring an offering and come before him.... Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.”* These words are from the Old Testament book of Chronicles which suggest that we experience the love of God every day. Something for which we have to be thankful every day.

Or from Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, we hear these words: *“Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”*

And, of course, from the text for this morning we hear this admonition; *“After you eat and are full, give praise to the Lord your God for the good land he gave you. Make sure that you never forget the Lord or disobey his laws and teachings that I am giving you this day.”* (Deut. 8:10-11)

As I said, on Thanksgiving we will celebrate Thanksgiving. We will be particularly mindful of the harvest. Homes, and some churches, will be decorated with squash and pumpkins, multi-colored leaves, corn, grapevines, and other produce including jars of all the good stuff like we used to can on the farm, such things as pickles, jams, and jellies.

Families will get together and sit down to bounteous feasts of turkey with all the trimmings, with apple cider and pumpkin pie. We will reward ourselves—those of us who can—with the bounties and fruits of the harvest. We will even remember those less fortunate than ourselves. We will hold dinners at shelters and soup kitchens and we will have given a little extra to the food banks. And we will be satisfied.

And that is good—but it also might be bad.

It is good because it is right that we should feast and thank God for what God has given us, it is right to celebrate and to share the bounty of the earth and sea, it is good to express appreciation and to rejoice over the goodness of God. In fact, in the Old Testament Scriptures it was mandated that the people bring the *“first fruits”* of their herds and fields and offer them as a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God at the temple.

But I suggest that also might be bad—depending on our overall attitude and approach to life for what God has done for us and continues to do for us.

Some of you might remember the old Ma and Pa Kettle television series. Now, I realize many of you are wondering just how ancient this guy must be to talk about things like Ma and Pa Kettle. But, in a classic scene that was to be found in many of the episodes at dinner time Ma Kettle would ring the triangle on the porch, and from every corner and crevice around the yard hordes of screaming, yelling children would pour into the house fighting for a place at the table. Then Ma, in her best stentorian tones would holler, *“Hold it!”* and everyone would freeze in silence. Pa Kettle would roll his eyes heavenward; tip his hat, and say, *“Much obliged.”* And immediately the melee began as abruptly as it had stopped.

My friends, it is possible that God might be calling us to something much better than a tip of the hat.

God calls us not only to a day of thanksgiving—as he has called his people from the time of Moses; God calls us to a life of thanks-living.

For me, the difference between thanksgiving and thanks-living is between giving thanks on one day and *living thanks* everyday—finding thanksgiving everywhere you look. Thanksgiving Day is a terminal event. Thanks-living is a way of life.

And, again, giving thanks is important—it is the starting point to where we need to go with our lives.

When we give thanks as a community, as a family, we are reminded of all the good things and all the good people that we have been given or gifted with. We remember that we have been blessed; we remember that there is a greater good than ourselves—if only for a moment of a day—on a special day proclaimed as a day we call Thanksgiving.

But the temptation is to then return to our self-sufficiency, to forget God, to say to ourselves, *“my strength and my ability have gotten me thus far in life.”*—and then to yearn for more, and to expect it as if it were our right and our privilege.

This is where thanks-living comes into the picture. We begin to *“live thanks”* when we open our lives up to God and give God first place.

As we do this—as we humble ourselves before God and acknowledge that God is the source of all good things, our awareness of our blessings increases, our joy becomes fuller, and we find ourselves in an attitude and state of grace.

Like Abraham and Sarah, we discover we have been blessed to be a blessing. Our continual thankfulness for our blessings will turn into a lifetime of living thanks, of living the blessing and sharing the blessing because we know in the deepest parts of our hearts that God is the giver of it all.

As you give thanks this Thanksgiving Day, remember your calling to be joyful always, to pray continually, and to give thanks in all circumstances. It is what God wants of you and for you. In it you will find the fullness of what God has in store for you.

When we do not find the joy and meaning we long for in life we can become disgruntled and complain about God and his presence and goodness toward us and we say we cannot find God.

Which leads us to the fable told about a far-off land which was ruled by a tyrant. The tyrant had an iron-clad grip over all parts of his kingdom, except for one frustrating area. He was unable to destroy the people’s belief in God.

He summoned his counselors and put the question to them: *“Where can I hide God so that the people will end up forgetting him?”*

One counselor suggested that God be hidden on the dark side of the moon. This proposal was debated for some time, but voted down because it was believed that one day scientists would discover a means of space travel and God would end up being found again.

Another advisor to the tyrant came up with the idea of burying God beneath the depths of the ocean floor. This was voted down for basically the same reason—it was felt that scientific advancement would lead to the discovery of God even beneath the depths of the ocean floor.

Finally, the oldest and wisest of the counselors had a flash insight. *“I know,”* he said, *“why don’t we hide God somewhere no one will ever think of finding him?”* He explained, *“If we hide God in the ordinary events of people’s everyday lives they’ll never find him.”*

And so, it was done—and they say that people are still looking for God—even today.

If we engage in the business of *“thanks living”* it is less likely that we will have such difficulty finding God and experiencing the relationship with Him that He longs for us to have.

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