

Pastor's Message
 Thanksgiving, 2020
 Deuteronomy 8:7-18; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

*O say can you see, by the dawn's early light,
 What so proudly we hail'd at the twilight's last gleaming,
 Whose broad stripes and bright stars through ...*

No, we're not going to start this Message singing the National Anthem, but today we are focusing on a national holiday: Thanksgiving Day. Thanksgiving is not a religious holiday. It is a national holiday. It is pretty much a law that we give thanks to God on this day, and presidents, specifically Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt, have proclaimed it as such. Yet, we are not always a grateful people, so we cloud it up with football and turkey and parades and parties and whatnot.

Washington and Dallas and Houston and Detroit will play football games on Thanksgiving Day and those games and all, or most, sports events begin with the national anthem. Most people know the words to the first verse of the Star Spangled Banner. Or they think they do. They think that's the National Anthem, but they don't know that it has four verses.

The fourth verse is a hymn of thanks and praise and a reminder of where the victory, the peace, indeed all gifts come from.

*O thus be it ever when freemen shall stand
 Between their lov'd home and the war's desolation!
 Blest with vict'ry and peace may the heav'n rescued land
 Praise the power that hath made and preserv'd us a nation!
 Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just,
 And this be our motto – "In God is our trust,"
 And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave
 O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.*

Even in our National Anthem we are asking, can't we pray together on this one thing: that we need to be grateful and give thanks and praise to God, no matter what? Because when we trust in him, we know gratitude.

"Gratitude," said the Roman philosopher, Cicero, "is not only the greatest of virtues, but it is the parent of all others." But Cicero never lived in the wilderness. The people of Israel knew the wilderness. In their wandering from Egypt to the promised Land, they knew want and scarcity: shortages of food and water. They had been threatened by snakes and scorpions.

All throughout the biblical books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, they wander through the desert. It takes them a whole generation to complete their

pilgrim's progress from the fleshpots of Egypt to the promised land. Only a handful of those who witness the parting of the Red Sea waters will ever get their feet wet crossing the Jordan. It is only their children who will enter the land God set out for them, the rich land "flowing with milk and honey."

It's possible to take today's reading from Deuteronomy 8 as something like the typical American Thanksgiving Day prayer: "For the bounty of this groaning table, O Lord, we give you hearty [and self-satisfied] thanks." But that would be a huge mistake. Deuteronomy's story of the land flowing with milk and honey is a cautionary tale: "Do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery ... [the one who] made water flow for you from flint rock" (vv. 14-15).

But a wilderness doesn't have to be literal in order to be awful. Many people today, literally the whole world, are wandering through the wilderness of the coronavirus. Many today are living in their own wilderness and a wilderness that we all share. The words of Psalm 107, written centuries ago, are still relevant today:

- 10 Some sat in darkness and deepest gloom,
imprisoned in iron chains of misery.
- 13 "LORD, help!" they cried in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress.
- 14 He led them from the darkness and deepest gloom;
he snapped their chains.
- 15 Let them praise the LORD for his great love
and for the wonderful things he has done for them.
- 17 Some were fools; they rebelled
and suffered for their sins.
- 19 "LORD, help!" they cried in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress.
- 20 He sent out his word and healed them,
snatching them from the door of death.
- 21 Let them praise the LORD for his great love
and for the wonderful things he has done for them.
- 23 Some went off to sea in ships,
plying the trade routes of the world.
- 25 ... the winds rose,
stirring up the waves.
- 26 Their ships were tossed to the heavens
and plunged again to the depths;
the sailors cringed in terror.
- 28 "LORD, help!" they cried in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress.

²⁹ He calmed the storm to a whisper
and stilled the waves.

³⁰ What a blessing was that stillness
as he brought them safely into harbor!

³¹ Let them praise the LORD for his great love
and for the wonderful things he has done for them.

⁴² The godly will see these things and be glad,
while the wicked are struck silent.

⁴³ Those who are wise will take all this to heart;
they will see in our history the faithful love of the LORD.

In a time of "Stay-at-home," some have learned the value of cocooning while others suffer in isolation amidst the homes they have built and the stuff they have gathered over the years.

But what does a grateful person do with his or her stuff? There are several things that are appropriate.

Take charge of what has been given to you. Have it. Don't let it have you. It is easy to become so anxious about the possibility of not having enough that we begin to hoard what we have. We are not really free to use it. We don't really have it. It has us. Of course, we should manage what we have well and live within our income. If we can believe that the one who gave us what we have for today will give us what we need for tomorrow, we will be able to possess things in freedom, not in anxiety. Paul made this clear in our scripture lesson for today. "He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness" (v. 10).

Use what you have. Use it to provide for the needs of your family. Use it to enlarge the perimeters of your own life. Use it for educational opportunities that will strengthen and enable your personhood and that of those near you. Enjoy it. Make the most of it. Let it make your life good.

Some of the stuff you have may become sacramental. Jesus took common things, bread, wine, water, and made them symbols of God's love for us. Some of the things we have will eventually accumulate meanings. They will call to mind loving relationships or memories of happy times. In fact, everything we have can become a reminder of God's love for us. That is why we return thanks before eating meals. It is a good thing to let our stuff become reminders of God's love.

Finally, a loving person who possesses his or her stuff in freedom, will eventually feel a need to share. The needs of your church and your community will naturally become a part of your individual or family budget. These are really not even forms of giving. They are simply uses of your stuff to meet your own needs and those of others around you. When you realize that you are more able than some to contribute to those shared endeavors, it will be natural for you to share more.

In Paul's Letter to the Corinthians and to us, he has sounded forth the "call to alms" for the early church and for us today. All that we have belongs to God. To celebrate Thanksgiving in its truest sense is to place life into its proper perspective. We began life with empty hands and will leave it the same way. All we have belongs to God, who loans it to us to use as good stewards. In doing so, our thanksgiving becomes thanks-living.

We are not self-sufficient. We are totally dependent on the grace of God. All that we have is a gift from God to be shared freely. Thanksgiving Day offers us an opportunity to express our appreciation for the gift of life. Generous and cheerful giving is an act of worship that honors our God. It is a privilege to share our blessings. Giving is sacramental, an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality. God's love for us knows no limits as God's grace flows through our lives. God's abundant, overflowing grace provides all things good and necessary.

Generosity is more than a concept in the abstract. Generosity is a way to live and act on our faith. Everything we have been given, everything we are, everything we have the potential to become is a gift from God. All the blessings we have received are gifts from God.

Yes, I know we work hard. Our parents worked hard. We did well in school. We followed the rules. We did a lot in our lives to earn what we have, but the foundation was within use. The possibility was before us. The opportunity was provided to us. The root of that foundation and possibility and opportunity is God's love and provision for us.

To live with generosity of spirit, to live in generosity, is to be grateful for all the gifts we have been given and to widely sow from those gifts into the world around us. We are enriched by what God has given us. It is our task to enrich the lives of others, to build up the church, the community, and the people we encounter. This Thanksgiving, when we pause to reflect on the gifts we have been given, let's also reflect on the gifts we can share. That will make a difference in the lives of those around us, and in our own lives as well.

Giving is a matter for our hearts. The decision for sharing grows out of our response to our situation. Giving is the response of our heart to our discovery of how blessed we are by the love and goodness of God. Our giving is the thoughtful decision of our faith in recognition that we have sufficiency for our lives and for our obligations, and out of that abundance we will give to others.

We give as our act of praise and thanksgiving. We give as our testimony of our faith that God has blessed us in the past and God will continue to bless us in the future. We give so that others may see the abundance of God and desire to open themselves to that goodness. We give out of our thanksgiving so that there will be a choir full of praise and thanksgiving from those who receive and those who are blessed by the gifts. But our giving is not caused or in response to the needs of the victims. Our giving as children of God is out of the profound awareness of how much we have been blest by God's goodness to us.