

Deo Gratias - Thank God

Twenty-Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

November 19, 2023

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Scripture

Deuteronomy 8:7-11, 17-18

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you.

Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes that I am commanding you today.

...

Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.' But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.

Sermon

It's four days until Thanksgiving: the most family-focused, food-filled national holiday we have.

It's a wonderful time to gather together to eat a good meal, watch a parade or some football, take a nap on the couch, and plan what to do with the leftovers. As a nation, we commemorate the events of the early Pilgrims, immigrants whose losses and survival after that first New England winter were lifted up in a feast. It was "a time to rejoice together after a more special manner," as declared by their governor, William Bradford. Nathaniel Philbrick's account of the event is described in his book, *Mayflower*:

The first Thanksgiving marked the conclusion of a remarkable year. Eleven months earlier the Pilgrims had arrived at the tip of Cape Cod, fearful and uninformed. They had spent the next month alienating and angering every Native American they happened to come across. By all rights none of the Pilgrims should have emerged from the first winter alive. (p. 119)

Yet, survive they did, though families suffered great loss and hardship. The rest survived in large part thanks to the native people who helped them --- showing them how to fertilize, and

to grow local foods: corn, squash, beans, peas, and barley. And when their harvest came in the late summer after that cruel and devastating winter, the Pilgrims gathered together. They were joined by local natives – the sachem Massasoit and 100 people from the village of Pokanoket --who came with freshly killed deer – and they had a feast together.

The Pilgrims celebrated and gave thanks to God. In their singing, they used words from the Psalms:

*Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness.
Come into God's presence with singing. Enter his gates with thanksgiving.
For the Lord is good. God's steadfast love endures forever. (Psalm 100)*

That act of eating together, of celebrating, of giving thanks to God was the essence of their Biblical faith. Eat. Celebrate. Give thanks. In the book of Deuteronomy, the heart of the Law, Moses said to the gathered people of Israel:

*You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you.
Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God.*

Eat. Celebrate. Remember. Give thanks.

And so we do – in this act of deepest faithfulness. Yet, this is not only a duty, an obligation. "It is at the heart of what it is to be human: to acknowledge that life is a gift and thank the giver." (John Buchanan, Saying Grace.)

Theologian Walter Brueggeman writes:

*Praise is the duty and delight, the ultimate vocation of the human community...
Praise is not only a human requirement and human need, it is also a human delight.
We have a resilient hunger to move beyond self, to return our energy and worth to the One from whom it has been granted. In our return to that One, we find our deepest joy.*

It is indeed a joy and a delight to gather to thank God --Deo Gratias – and to participate in God's generosity. One of my favorite preachers, John Buchanan, expressed this well:

"To praise God for the givenness of life -- corporately in worship or in private prayer or at table with loved ones – is to be called out of yourself for a moment or two, to be called away from the relentless focus on me, mine, my needs, my feelings, and to focus on something greater."

I love how he continues, seeing as the day after Thanksgiving is one of the most over-wrought shopping experiences of the year:

Such thanks "is a countercultural subversive act in a market economy and culture that tells us over and over again that our needs are what really matter, that meeting our needs, whatever they are, will make us happy. True worship calls us away from narcissism, away from self, and into the presence of God. It is in the words of the great hymn, to be 'lost in wonder, love, and praise.'" (Saying Grace)

Thanksgiving is what we Christians do. Deo Gratias. Thank God. It is what all people of faith do as we acknowledge who we are before our Creator and Sustainer. This past week, several church members joined together in an early Thanksgiving dinner hosted by our friends at MARTI – Maryland Turkish American Inhabitants. It was an intentionally interfaith event: Muslim, Jewish, Christian—many varieties, Unaffiliated, open wide to the community. Everyone was welcomed, and welcomed warmly. We sat at tables and shared a meal and gave thanks for food, for the gift of being together. And we prayed – for mutual wellbeing. We prayed for those who were hungry, that all would be satisfied. We prayed for peace – peace upon all people.

I have taken on a new spiritual practice --- and I am surprised how long it has taken me to do this – but each day I give thanks to God and list what I am thankful for in the moment. It started slowly and awkwardly. It began when I'd wake up around 3 am, and instead of stewing over things to do, or stuff to worry about, I decided that I would instead think about things that I was thankful for. It started really slowly – I had to think hard. But, now that I've been doing this for a while, I've discovered that gratitude flows much more easily now. In fact, it's become a fountain rather than meager drops. So, you can be sure that that evening, after that dinner, I wholeheartedly gave thanks to God for the gift of the MARTI community – for their generous inclusion & intentional diversity, for the delicious food (oh – the baklava!), for the extended and meaningful conversation I had with a 19 year old woman at my table – and most of all, I was thankful for the spirit of hopefulness that shared meal gave to everyone there. Everyone left that building with a smile. I think we all left more fully human.

Eat. Celebrate. Give thanks. *Deo Gratias*. Thank you, God.

How grateful I am today, and I expect that we are all thankful, for the ability to gather together to say Deo Gratias. As our congregation focuses on the theme of Belonging, Connection, Community, how grateful we are that we are able to "gather together to ask the Lord's blessing." We have learned, after peak COVID, that this is something that we can never again take for granted.

How grateful we are that we can be here to look one another in the eye, we can pass the peace, and that technology is able to connect us by video and by phone. We can SING together! "Let all things now living a song of thanksgiving to God our Creator triumphantly raise." And in our sorrow, we can grieve together. We can gather together to mourn and to give thanks to God for the lives of the saints of our congregation.

Our Thanksgiving voices rise to God, not because our lives have been free from suffering, or worry, or pain, or death. But because we know that "in life and in death, we belong to God." God is the source – from whom we come and to whom we return. Like the Pilgrims, we know that we belong to God forever. On this Thanksgiving Sunday, I am grateful that we are gathered to give to God our thanks and our praise.

For the blessings that we have shared throughout this year. For the sorrows we have borne together. For the Spirit which has inspired us to give generously to a world in need. Let us rejoice together. *Deo Gratias*. Thank God. Thank God.