

Thankfulness

WNMC – Matins

Oct. 7, 2018

Elmer Thiessen

Lectionary Readings: Joel 2:21-27; Psalm 126; 1 Tim. 2:1-7; Matt 6:25-33

Verse for Reflection: “Do not worry about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6).

Hymn of Response: Hymnal #386 “As Saints of Old”

On this Thanksgiving weekend, it is appropriate to reflect on the theme of thankfulness. I believe all of our lectionary readings, in one way or another, touch on this theme.

Let me start with a few questions – How thankful are you this morning? How often do you thank God for the many ways in which he has blessed you? Do you and I find it easy to give thanks to God? Are we by nature thankful?

I am inclined to think that we have problems in this area of thankfulness. We have to teach our children to be thankful. And we as adults often forget to express our thanks to God.

I can recall a few times when I was very thankful. Most recently, of course, I am thankful for Maggie’s successful surgery and amazingly quick recovery. I also have vivid memories of an incident in 2002, when I was absent-mindedly walking home after finishing a morning of lectures at Medicine Hat College, and I slipped on some ice and broke my ankle. It was in fact a serious break, though it took two emergency doctors, both of them friends of mine, to convince me that I needed surgery. Indeed, it took quite a few pins and plates to restore my ankle to normal shape and size. So I ended the semester lecturing from a wheelchair, with Maggie driving me around for weeks on end. I still remember hesitantly walking up to the pulpit to preach one Sunday, without my crutches – scary, but I was filled with feelings of gratitude. Indeed, in the months that followed, I would often thank God for the ability to walk. But then, slowly, I began to take it for granted.

Tell me, did you or I thank God for the ability to walk into this sanctuary this morning? I suspect most of us will have to answer this question in the negative. So, I am going to pause for a few seconds, to give each of us time to say a brief silent prayer of thanksgiving for feet that can walk.

Our Old Testament readings describe two different contexts in which the people of Israel were led to praise and thank God in new ways. “O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the LORD your God,” we read in Joel (2:23). Psalm 26 gives us a description of exuberant praise and thanksgiving. Mouths filled with laughter and tongues shouting for joy (26:2).

Joel was called by God to help the people understand what God was doing when their land was invaded by hoards of locusts that blocked out the sun and ate up everything in their path (Joel 1:4-5, 2:25). Why this terrifying spectacle and experience that lasted for several years? God was punishing them for their sins.

But God is also gracious and merciful, and so when the people repented “with fasting and weeping and mourning,” as we read in verse 12 of the same chapter, God relented and destroyed the army of locusts and sent rain to renew the land so it could once again produce an abundant harvest (Joel 2:22-4). Indeed, the storage bins are now full of grain, the kegs full of wine, and the kitchens are supplied with plenty of oil (vs. 24). It is because God has supplied all the staples for living in abundance, that the people are shouting their hallelujahs to God (2:26).

Like Joel, Psalm 26 is a song of restoration. “When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream, the Psalmist says in verse 1. What were these seemingly impossible dreams? Most probably the context here is the Israelites in Babylonian exile dreaming about returning to Jerusalem. Exile was painful. It was characterized by weeping and going about one’s daily activities like sowing seed with tears, always dreaming of a better day (vs. 5-6). And then the seemingly impossible dream comes true – restoration and return to the homeland. No wonder that their mouths are filled with laughter and their tongues are shouting praise and thanksgiving to God (vss. 2, 6).

But note that in both this Psalm and the Joel passage, thanksgiving arises out of a contrasting situation where there is exile and calamity and distress. It is when good times return that we find it easy to break out in praise and thanksgiving to God. But what happens after harvests have been plentiful for several years? What happens when exile is a distant memory? We begin to take our good fortune for granted. Indeed, we even begin to think that we are entitled to live with plenty. Moses warns about this very danger before the Israelites entered the promised land. You might want to read the passage at home (Deut. 8:12-14; 17-18).

Our reading in first Timothy is the only lectionary reading that specifically uses the word “thanksgiving”. “First of all then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for Donald Trump, and Doug Ford and all who are in high positions” (1 Tim 2:1-2). That is what my translation reads! Well perhaps it is only my interpretation of what these verses are saying!!

That is hard, isn’t it –thanking God for everyone, for rulers and presidents and all who are in high positions. Remember, that Paul is giving this advice within a political context that is far from ideal - a Palestine under Roman rule, with some pretty ruthless rulers. And it is in **this** context that Paul encourages us to pray and give thanks for all who are in high positions. My hunch is that praying with thanksgiving might help to soften our attitudes towards administrators and rulers whom we don’t like.

Our gospel reading is from the Sermon on the Mount - a summary of Jesus’ teachings on a wide variety of practical topics. “Do not worry,” Jesus tells us.

Don't worry about what you will eat, or what you will drink, or what you will wear. Nowhere in this passage does it talk specifically about thanksgiving. But my hunch is that there is a connection between the admonition not to worry and thanksgiving. Thankfulness drives out worry. That is why I chose the verse that appears at the beginning of your order of service, from Philippians. "Do not worry about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Phil. 4:6). Instead of worrying, pray with thanksgiving.

There is in fact a close parallel between this verse and the one we have just considered in 1 Timothy. In 1 Timothy, Paul urges that prayers, supplications, and thanksgivings be made for everyone. Philippians uses the same words but in the singular – prayer, supplication and thanksgiving. But the focus is different. In 1 Timothy Paul urges that prayers and thanksgiving be made for everyone. In Philippians, the focus is on everything, not everyone. That pretty well covers the gamut of human experience, doesn't it? Do not worry about anything or anyone, but in everything and about everyone, pray and make supplication, with thanksgiving.

May God help us not to fear, not to worry, but to be glad and rejoice, and always in everything and for everyone give thanks. Amen.