

Message for Thanksgiving, October 10, 2021

Exodus 32:1-6

Luke 17:11-19

In a column that was written a few years ago, the Rev. Dr. Stephen Farris related an episode that happened during his student days when he was training for the ministry. The class was discussing the scripture passage where Jesus said that whoever doesn't receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. "But why like a child?", the professor asked. Then, in Farris' own words:

"One student raised a hand and asserted with considerable confidence, 'Because little children are naturally good and innocent.'

The professor simply replied, 'You don't have any children, do you?' It was true; any parent would know better.

Someone else answered, 'Because children are all so humble.'

The professor stroked his beard and asked, 'Have you ever stood outside a schoolyard during recess and listened to the children?'

Several more possibilities were raised, each more unlikely than the last. Finally the professor reached into his pocket, pulled out his wallet and extracted a \$20 bill. He walked over to a student named Don and gave the bill to him. Don turned the shade of a Canadian Mountie's dress uniform.

'You don't like me giving you money, do you?' asked the professor. Don was holding the bill as if it was burning the tips of his fingers. 'Now if I asked you to come over to my house to do some yard work and I paid you, you wouldn't mind at all.' There were nods of agreement. After all, we would have earned the money.

'But what if I gave the money to a child?'

No further words were necessary for the picture came to mind of a child reaching out a hand to receive what had not been earned, a child who thought it the most natural thing in the world to receive a gift. There is a word I have heard for the gift we have been given, the gift we can never earn. That word is grace."

The unearned and unmerited gift of God's love and forgiveness; that is grace. It occurred to me though that in place of the word grace, we could also use the words gratitude or thankfulness. A child is happy to receive a gift and accepts it for what it is; an unearned and undeserved present with no strings attached. It may well be though that gratitude comes more easily and naturally for a child than an adult because so often we adults are too proud to accept an unearned gift or wonder what the catch is when we are offered one. And yet being thankful for what we have received through God's grace and love, however undeserved or unearned, is what today is all about.

Today's first scripture passage describes a part of what happened during the Exodus. Moses was up on Mount Sinai getting the Ten Commandments and had been gone for quite a while. In his absence, the people collected all the gold they could, melted it down and then made it into the shape of a calf. After that they started worshiping the calf saying that it was the god that had freed them from slavery in Egypt. Not surprisingly, Moses got very angry when he came down from the mountain carrying the Ten Commandments and discovered what they were doing. But why was Moses, and even God himself, so upset? Not for the reason we might expect.

Most people assume that God and Moses were angry because the people had broken the second of the Ten Commandments, the one about not worshiping foreign idols. This is a natural assumption, but it is wrong; what we have to remember is that the people hadn't even seen the Ten Commandments yet! So why then were both God and Moses so angry?

Simply because the people had already forgotten about their dependence upon God. It was God who had freed them from slavery. It was God who saved them when they were trapped on the shores of the Reed Sea. It was God who had made sure that they had enough to eat and drink during the journey. God had done all of these wonderful undeserved things for his people and yet there they were: far from feeling grateful, in no time at all they had totally forgot about God and their dependence upon him. But of course that is not the only time when God's people displayed a shocking lack of gratitude for their undeserved blessings; we can consider today's second scripture passage.

That lesson is the 'traditional' New Testament lesson for Thanksgiving and it's certainly not hard to see why. As Luke tells us, one day when Jesus entered a village, he was met by ten lepers. Leprosy was one of the most dreaded

diseases of the ancient world as it was not only terribly disfiguring but incurable as well. If a person contracted the disease, then that person became an outcast and was expected to go and live in the local cemetery. In fact, one custom was to even hold a funeral service for the leper since he or she was now considered to be dead to their family and friends. One day then as Jesus entered a village, he was met by ten of these unfortunate people. They asked him to cure them, which he did. Then Jesus told the ten to go show themselves to a priest as only a priest could give them a clean bill of health. Off they went and so far so good, but then comes the twist; only one of the ten returned to say thank you and he was the one that we would least expect to do so, the foreigner! But why didn't the other nine return? Or why were the Hebrews in the Exodus so desperate to avoid acknowledging their dependence upon God that they created a god of their own imagination? Or to return to the student named Don at the beginning of today's message, why was he so reluctant to accept the \$20 bill?

The answer quite simply is pride. The truth is that whether it be to God or someone else, many people find it difficult to say a heartfelt thank you simply because that means humbling themselves and acknowledging a need and perhaps even a dependence upon others. We live in a society where independence is prized but saying thank you and really meaning it is an act of humility that goes against the grain for many, unlike the members of the Masai tribe in Africa.

When a member of that tribe wishes to express their heartfelt gratitude to another person, they lie down on the ground before the other person. Then, instead of just saying 'thank you', they say 'my face is in the dust before you'.

Now that is gratitude in action, but can you imagine any of us ever doing something like that? How humiliating! It is ironical but nevertheless true that often the more we have to be grateful for, the less we really are. Rather than admit to our dependence and even our need for both God and others, we prefer to reason that we either deserve or else have worked hard to earn life's good things. And if we deserve them or have earned them, then why should we be thankful? To paraphrase an Old Testament passage, we often like to reason that: "It is my power and the strength of my hands that have produced all this wealth for me".

Pride and independence do have a place in our lives but even so, as Moses said, "It is God who gives you the ability to produce wealth". It is God

who has made it all possible in the first place and that in a nutshell is why we need Thanksgiving. Today is the day when we pause to count our blessings and then say thank you for everyone who touches our lives for the better, and for all of life's other good things as well. Indeed the depth of our ultimate dependence upon God is made clear by this little episode.

“One day a hungry boy asked his mother, ‘How long does it take to bake a loaf of bread?’

‘Oh, about a million years’, came the reply.

‘A million years! How come?’

‘Well’, said the mother, ‘before I could bake the bread the wheat had to be ground. Before that, it had to be harvested and of course before that it had to be grown. But before that God had to create the seed, the soil, the climate and a world that would enable the wheat to exist and grow.’ ‘That’s why’, she said, ‘it takes a million years to bake a loaf of bread; the loaf is just the last step of a very long process that God started a long, long time ago, all so that we might have something to eat for lunch today.’”

We may not always realize it and we may not always like to acknowledge it, but we are dependent upon both God and others for so much in life. That is why we have Thanksgiving and that in fact is why we even need Thanksgiving. We need it to remind us not to take God and his many blessings for granted, believing in our pride and foolishness that it is the power and strength of our hands that has provided all this wealth and life's other good things for us.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, hear us now as we give you thanks on this Thanksgiving Sunday, for even as the pandemic continues, we still have so much to be grateful for.

We give you thanks Lord, for the products of field, forest and factory, and lake, ocean, and air as well.

We give you thanks Lord, for farmers, fishermen, inventors, factory workers, those who transport their products to us, and those who sell them.

We give you thanks Lord, for our houses and apartments, and for those who design, build, and service them.

We give you thanks Lord, for the sights and sounds of country and town, and the ability that we have to enjoy them.

We give you thanks Lord, for the pleasures of entertainment and the arts.

We give you thanks Lord, for the companionship and love of family and friends.

We give you thanks Lord, for your Church, her witness and ministry.

We give you thanks Lord, for the creating, redeeming, wonder that is you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

As we give you thanks, we also set before You the needs of others, and so we pray for the hungry and the homeless, the sick and the abandoned, the poor and the destitute, the exploited and the dispossessed, the wounded and the broken.

We pray for those struggling for justice and those who work for peace.

We pray for government and non-government agencies as they seek to alleviate human need both here and abroad.

We pray too for those of special personal concern to us during this Thanksgiving season.

We ask these things through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen