

Epworth Chapel on the Green

October 12, 2014
Harvest Festival
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Deuteronomy 8:6-18
Psalm 113:1-8
2 Corinthians 9:6-15
Luke 17:11-19

One hot summer day a grandmother was walking with her 5 year old grandson on the beach. As they walked, suddenly a huge wave crashed down upon them and carried the little boy out to sea. The woman looked up to the sky, shaking her fist: “God, this is unacceptable. This is unbearable. How can you take an innocent child like this?”

No sooner were the words out of her mouth when another rogue wave arrived, depositing the child back at her feet. The elderly grandmother swept her grandson up in her arms, holding him tightly. Then she looked up at the sky again and said: “Hey, this child had a hat!”

As we gather together today to celebrate Harvest Festival, an important truth surfaces for us in our Old Testament lesson.

The principle that emerges here is that living a life of gratitude and maintaining a spirit of gratitude is not always the *natural, human* response to the

good things we enjoy in our lives. Because of this, gratitude is a response which needs continually to be cultivated and nurtured in our lives.

This is why the writer of Deuteronomy cautions the children of Israel, and says to them: “when you enter the good land the LORD is giving you, you will find much abundance there. You will enjoy many good things. *But be careful to remember the LORD your God.*”

Gratitude to God does not seem to be a naturally inherent or automatic response to the blessings in our lives. I think perhaps one reason for this is that we human beings like to perpetuate the myth that we are independent and self-made, that we can do it all and manage it all ourselves. In our stubbornness and pride, we human beings simply do not like to admit that we are dependent upon God for all of life.

So, when the children of Israel enter the land of Canaan and things are good, they are tempted to say, “My, look what we have done.” It’s no wonder that the Trappist monk Thomas Merton once remarked that “the essence of sin is ingratitude.”

But there is a reason why God has blessed us, brothers and sisters. Paul tells us (and the Corinthians) what that reason is. According to Paul, we’ve been blessed in order to be a blessing. God has sown seeds of generosity and

compassion into our lives because God wants to reap a harvest of great generosity in us.

Paul gives us great insight into God's economy as he asks the poor Corinthians to contribute to an offering being taken for Christians in Jerusalem. You see, most people live today with a philosophy of *scarcity*, where there are limited resources and only so much to go around. In that kind of world, persons are careful to look out for themselves first, to hoard resources, to keep things pretty close to the vest.

But Paul lives with the philosophy of *abundance*. For him, God is the great Multiplier, who does his work by blessing persons and then asking them to pass on the blessings to others. And because the law of sowing and reaping states that one always reaps more than is sown, God is able to take the generosity of people and multiply it beyond human measure or understanding.

The writer of Proverbs confirms Paul's teaching. He says: "It is possible to give freely and become more wealthy, but those who are stingy will lose everything. The generous prosper and are satisfied; those who refresh others will themselves be refreshed." (Prov. 11:24-25)

As we celebrate the harvest today, and we commemorate God's great grace in our lives, I want to leave you with the words of St. Paul as he writes to the Corinthians. As he writes, he is specifically writing to challenge the Corinthians to

give sacrificially to the offering being taken for Christians in Jerusalem. But his words can apply to us, in any situation we face in today's world.

Listen to his words: *“God loves the person who gives cheerfully. And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others.”* (2 Cor. 9:7b-8).

As we prepare to come to the Lord's Table this morning, let us ask ourselves *what might happen if we started to live like this was really true.* And let us rise from this place this morning and go forth with a desire in our hearts to be conduits of God's abundance, passing on to others the grace he has given to us.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.