

Epworth Chapel on the Green
October 13, 2013
Pentecost 21/Harvest Festival
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Deuteronomy 8:6-18
Psalm 121
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 celebrate the Harvest Festival this year, our Scripture lessons once again return us to the theme of *gratitude*. Perhaps the timing of this is all good and right, because with everything that is happening around us in the external world, it can be good to stop for a moment and to look *inward* – to give thanks and praise to God for the blessings in our lives.

I'd like to explore with you this morning three characteristics of biblical gratitude.

First, gratitude is *proper*. And cultivating a life of gratitude is *proper* and appropriate. It is “meet and right” so to do, as we often say. The reason that gratitude is a proper posture in life is because *every good thing you have in your life is a gift from God*. You didn't get it by your own ingenuity, cleverness, hard work, wisdom, or wit. It came solely from the merciful hand of Almighty God.

This is the message to the children of Israel in Deuteronomy. God is leading them from trial and hardship into blessing and abundance. But they are always to remember that it is God who is the source of their life and blessing.

Second, biblical gratitude is *perpetual*. God's people are not thankful just one day of the year, or just some of the time – but every day of the year, all of the time. Their gratitude is an *attitude*, a frame of mind and heart, a *lifestyle choice*.

Years ago two gentlemen were paired together to play golf at the St. Andrew's course in Ardsley, New York. One was an elderly man, the other was young. The older man played very thoughtfully, very deliberately. But the younger man was prideful and impatient. He began to hit errant shots, losing his ball in the tall grass on one hole, and into a water hazard on the next.

On the third hole he began to curse and blame his caddie. Bad shot after bad shot, the young man cursed and berated the man who was carrying his clubs.

When they finished the first nine holes, the young man was so enraged that he impolitely dispatched the caddie, and carried his own clubs for the second nine holes.

The two players began the back nine in silence. After several minutes, the older man said to his young playing partner:

Several years ago a little kid from Yonkers came up here and was taken on as a caddie. He was a wonderfully sweet-natured boy, quick witted, and he had a real nose for golf. Everybody liked him. His name was William. He had a club foot, but that did not affect his ability as a caddie. A doctor who was a member of the club became fond of William, and one day took him on a long trip. When William came back, he returned to his caddying duties. The doctor, however, had to quit playing shortly after than due to health problems. He died a few months later.

One morning I was playing at the club with William as my caddie. Spring was in full bloom, and the flowers were beautiful. As we played, William kept gathering flowers until he had gathered a most beautiful bouquet.

“Who is the lucky girl?” I asked.

“I don’t have a girl,” William answered shyly. “These are for my friend, the doctor. Twice a week I take flowers to his grave.”

The old golfer then said to his younger playing partner. “You see, when the doctor took William on that trip, he operated on his foot and made him whole. And William never forgot that act of kindness.”

The young player, still carrying his own clubs, said: “Now there is a caddie worth having. Whatever happened to this William, anyway?”

The old man replied: “He carried your bag today for the first nine holes.”

Being grateful is never a “one and done, some of the time” proposition. Gratitude is a *perpetual* way of life.

Third, biblical gratitude is pervasive. The scriptures make it clear that God’s people are to give thanks *in all things*. We are not always called upon to

give thanks *for* all things. But we are admonished to give thanks *in* all things. Our gratitude is to be pervasive. It is to extend into every part and parcel of life.

We can rejoice and be grateful for *spiritual things*. For being loved and called by God, for being adopted into His family as his children. For the love of Christ that took him to a cross. For relationship with God where we can come as His children to the throne of grace, where He hears our prayers, and where Jesus, the great High Priest, prays for us and intercedes for us. For the promise that says: “in the world you shall have trial and tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

We can rejoice and give thanks for *simple things*. For waking up each day to a new morning, to a sun that rises in the east and sets in the west and paints the most colorful kaleidoscope on its journey. For the dog or cat that licks your face early in the morning better than any alarm clock could ever do. For flipping a switch and having light. For walking to your closet and having to choose from *many* options what you will wear today. The list is endless.

And we can be grateful even for *sorrowful things*. Living a life of gratitude does not mean that we are escapists, that we are somehow oblivious to reality. And the reality is that the old cliché is true: “into each life a little rain must fall.”

Not only does the rain fall, but the truth is that the floods come. There are times in life where people walk through the valley of the shadow. Where sorrow and heartache and pain and tears threaten to win the day and write the final story.

What can God's people do in *those* times?

Well, Scripture tells us what God's people *have done*. They gave thanks and cultivated gratitude. Job said: "I came into the world with nothing, and I'll leave the world with nothing. Blessed be the Name of the Lord."

Habakkuk said, "the harvest may not come, and my fields and my stalls may be desolate. Still will I praise God and give Him thanks."

The apostle Paul and his colleague Silas were shackled in a basement dungeon. They looked at each other and began to sing in praise to God. As they did, their shackles fell off.

Shadrech, Meschech, and Abednigo were thrown into a fiery furnace by an angry king. They said, "God can deliver us from these flames, but even if He does not, we will praise Him rather than bow to your corrupt authority!"

When I was in Chicago for the LOVE, Inc., National Gathering a few weeks ago, I met a lady named Bev Schipper. One morning I sat with Bev and she told me her story.

She told me that recently she had awoken one morning with pain in her legs. The pain grew worse, and soon spasms racked her body. She was in immense pain

and incapable of walking or moving. Specialists examined her and could not determine what was wrong. Within a matter of weeks, Bev was curled up in a fetal position, unable to move, with a pump in her stomach. Her husband made arrangements for her to stay in their bedroom, where it had to be kept completely dark because Bev was sensitive to light of any kind.

Her husband would sit with her, and friends from her church would come and help. Soon, neighbors who lived nearby came and began to sit with Bev and help care for her.

I said to her: “Bev, what did you do?”

She said: “I could not move, the pain was so severe. All I could do was pray and talk to God and listen for Him to talk with me.”

I said to her: “This must have been terrible for you. How long did this last?”

She looked at me and said: “Fifteen years.”

What do you say to someone in that moment?

I sat there, dumbfounded, wiping away tears. Then she looked at me and said: “Nothing is impossible with God.”

As we come to the Lord’s Table this morning, I do not know all of the challenges that confront you in your life right now. I know that you have them, and that they sometimes are many.

As we come to the Table, I remind you that the word “Eucharist” means “to give thanks.” By God’s grace, let’s do just that this morning. And as you do, let his grace fill you and empower you. On this Harvest Festival, let gratitude be the song in our hearts, and let His praise be perpetually on our lips.

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