

Epworth Chapel on the Green
October 11, 2015
Pentecost 20/Harvest Festival
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Deuteronomy 8:6-18
Psalm 121
2 Corinthians 9:6-15
Luke 17:11-19

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*. It is never a “one and done” kind of thing.

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 needing 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 two years ago, I met a lady named Bev Schipper. One morning I sat with Bev and she told me her story.

She told me how one morning she had started her day with severe 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. Soon after that, 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.