

The Harvest of Thankful Seeds

Deuteronomy 8:7-18

Psalm 126

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Luke 17:11-19

Thanksgiving, the offering of thanks. It's not exactly the same thing as the holiday that bears its name. How many of you have ever watched a movie or heard someone tell you about a beautifully prepared Thanksgiving meal, gone wrong? Maybe it's your own story. Family disputes erupt. Unexpected guests arrive or expected ones never appear. Someone spills something or the turkey burns. Tensions run high at the holidays, there's so much planning that goes into a single day's events, so many people coming together from all their own lives' challenges, and the pressure to fulfill the expectations of the day can overshadow any hope of them actually being met. Not to mention all the memories of all the holidays that came before, previous years' highlights and disasters, and the faces that are or are not present at the table this year. Holidays are complicated.

Thanksgiving is especially complicated. Long before our time, the origins of this holiday were fraught. Depending on who's telling the tale, the stories of Thanksgiving may highlight the joy of freedom found in America...or...the oppression of colonizers usurping native lands. The Thanksgiving holiday may frame the coming together of native peoples with the struggling European to celebrate God's provision... or... the illnesses introduced that annihilated entire populations who had previously lived disease-free. The Thanksgiving story could be offered in hope of unity after a Civil War nearly destroyed this country's infancy or it could appear as propaganda to overlook the deeper wounds festering below.

Thanksgiving is complicated. Or is it? The proper noun version, the Thanksgiving of the Macy's Day Parade, turkey, and cranberry sauce, may be complicated. But the verb version of thanksgiving, the expression of gratitude; that is much more straightforward.

This evening, we have heard sacred readings from ancient people groups associated with different religious traditions. These people understood complicated stories and their writings map the complexities for us. Their wisdom, centuries later, helps provide guidance for us as we navigate our own complications. Their contexts were different from one another, just as ours today is from theirs in the past. Yet, each of these writers point to thanksgiving, the verb form, as the method for navigating complexity.

In the reading from Deuteronomy, we encounter the Hebrew people about to enter The Promised Land. This was a people group who had been promised amazing things from God, they'd seen the expansion of their people, and known prosperity. And then famine hit. Their means of rescue from the famine, refuge in Egypt, ultimately became a curse when they became enslaved by the Egyptians. They were slaves for over 400 years before they experienced a miraculous escape. Then they went from the euphoria of freedom to the demoralization of wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. In this writing from the Hebrew scriptures, we see their deliverer, Moses, recounting their story before they enter The Promised Land. He shares their joy and excitement for what's to come, but he gives them a warning. It is human nature to forget where we've come from, to adopt the fantasy that the world, as we experience it, is how it has always been, to blame the bad things on others and praise ourselves for the good. So, Moses tells them to remember. Remember your history. When the good things come, and they will, he says that remembering the past would serve as their protection. Remembering was what would keep them humble, thankful, and attentive to God.

They had a complex story full of both blessings and pain and he knew they would experience more of both in the future. For Moses and the Israelites, gratefulness to God, would safeguard their blessings for the future.

Then we heard from the Psalmist who recounts more of the story of the Hebrew people, from hundreds of years after Moses. Their story was further complicated when, after experiencing the prophesied blessings of God in The Promised Land, the bounty, and then the power of the monarchy, they were conquered by the Babylonians and hauled off into exile. This poem was written when the people were returning from exile. The Psalmist, in his poetry, demonstrates the practice of thanksgiving in the midst of their complex story.

These people had longed to return to their ancestral homes, but when they finally returned, the land was changed, their temple had been destroyed, and most of the people who had been taken into exile had died. This Psalm offers thanksgiving for the blessing of return, while also praying for the full restoration that had yet to occur. The Psalmist doesn't withhold thanksgiving because the restoration is incomplete. He lays hold of his claim for the future hope. Trusting in goodness, while honoring the tears that accompany it, is a powerful form of thanksgiving. Ambivalence can be challenging to hold, juggling warring emotions at the same time, and yet the ability to offer thanks while suffering demonstrates powerful wisdom. The planting metaphor he uses illustrates the potency of hope. Our ability to believe in a different future inspires us to plant seeds for that future, a plentiful harvest, even when the land we plant into may be barren and dry. Thankfulness is the tool that allows us to move into the good even when navigating the hard.

Our readings then took us to the Christian scriptures and a story about Jesus healing a group of folks who had been marginalized because of their bodies' disease. Israel had a complex history with both lepers and foreigners. Yet, in this story when Jesus heals this group, it was an outsider, someone who didn't belong, the Samaritan, who returned to offer thanks. It's a funny picture, to imagine this man, leaving his friends and running back to Jesus while loudly praising God. But I think it reminds us that those on the outside,

those in most desperate need, are often the ones most appreciative of good. Those of us who don't daily suffer from isolation or neediness, often feel good things are owed to us. But the people who don't expect to be cared for or to have enough can teach us much about loud proclamations of thanks. Our attitudes and words can have a huge impact on the world. Like seed thrown over a fallow field. There is no telling how many people heard of his healing and then sought out their own as a result. In a world where so many feel hopeless, thankfulness can be a profound inspiration for hope, a catalyst for building a better future.

We see this same cycle, the ripple effect of inspiration in Saint Paul's letter to the Corinthians. This letter was written at a time when Paul was undergoing significant physical struggles, and the Corinthian people were dealing with their own interpersonal struggles. Like all the people in today's texts, they too knew the complexities of life. And even so, Paul reminded them that, like farmers planting seeds, those who scatter thankfulness will also see a harvest of thankfulness in others. Specifically, Paul notes what we now have verified by science. There is a direct link between thankfulness and generosity which works on a cycle. When we choose to be grateful, we become increasingly altruistic. When we act out of that generosity, it inspires thankfulness in others which then makes them more altruistic. The bottom line is that our thanksgiving is a profound medicine to heal ourselves and our world. The complexities of life shouldn't keep us from Thanksgiving; rather, offering thanks can change the way we and others experience those complexities.

Holidays can be complicated. But gratefulness is not. Choosing to be thankful, to privilege the voices of joy and goodness, even in the face of difficulty, is what the holiday of Thanksgiving is all about. May we be a thankful people, grateful for the tremendous gift of

living in this country, with the freedom to publicly proclaim our Thanksgiving to God and one another. And may our thanksgiving be used to heal the brokenness in the world.