

Scripture
Hebrews 8: 8-18

Thanks be to God

Here we are - a Thanksgiving service in the middle of a pandemic, Normally on a day like this the church would have had folks come in and decorate it. We would celebrate a corporate offering of Thanksgiving. We would show up with things we had made, harvest we had grown and it is a beautiful gift in the season of harvest. Conventionally and commercially speaking, Thanksgiving is usually associated with material abundance: the things we eat, harvest, and stock up. Not only are material things pointed to, but also we focus on “we” in worship. It is “we” who offer to God; it is “we” who celebrate our fruitful year and our labour. I want to change our focus today and point not to us and what we do but to the abundance God has given us. It is God’s creation through the harvest for which we express our gratitude and it is to God that we give our thanks. Thanksgiving Sunday should help us look to God’s creation in the most worshipful and grateful way we can giving thanks for the “abundance” we have been given.

What does it look like to be thankful this year? What are we thankful for? What is the purpose of this weekend really? We can go back and look at the historical context of course and history is always important but today I want to think about deep appreciation and gratitude, something that goes beyond the surface.

Every year at thanksgiving dinner my mom asks “What are you thankful for?” There are some standard answers. I ask my girls for gratitudes and thanksgivings often almost daily and I can guarantee they will say ‘friends and family.’ Now that is not a bad thing and I really do believe they mean it but sometimes I encourage them to probe a bit deeper, or even shallower. Name something you can see right now that you appreciate, what do you have that you take for granted? One of the reasons I love to meditate is that it reminds me of every breath I take, the blood that pulses through my veins, every limb and muscle of my body are a gift and by the end I am reminded that life itself is a gift and sometimes I forget to live in gratitude.

Maybe this year for you it’s hard to feel very thankful. You know that you should, but life has been hard lately. I can understand that.

I have found myself in a lot of meetings over the last six months where I have been asked the question. What is a blessing of this time? What is a struggle? I've asked the question myself a myriad of times. And as we stop and pause most of us can find the blessings. Like, my garden looks better than it ever has, or time working from home has meant no commute, or I see more of my immediate family. But there is also a whole other layer of stress and anxiety for most. We miss our friends, we worry about our extended family in other countries, Personally, I regularly think about people in the congregation that I just have not connected with in way too long. I miss working with people face to face, in direct person to person community. Honestly I am a bit weary of talking to a screen but that is my role right now and it looks like it will be for awhile longer.

Then there are all the things that didn't stop just because of Covid-19. Some of you are still dealing with medical issues, or maybe this is one of those family holidays that will be missing a loved one for the first time, or maybe you're just stressed out from all the frantic craziness of life in our world, or maybe you're just wondering why the attitude of thankfulness you feel today is so hard to take into regular life the rest of the year, because you caught yourself complaining – again – even though you know deep down that you really have it pretty good compared to a lot of people in this world. Maybe you've already found yourself today singing hymns or speaking prayers of Thanksgiving because you know that's what you're supposed to do, but all the while on the inside you are feeling about as far from thankful as can be. And I'm sure you're not alone.

It was that thought that drew me to the scripture reading from Deuteronomy today. In a meeting a colleague read this scripture and then asked us "What wealth do you have?" (Go beyond the material financials) and When or where in your life are you forgetting God? The first question may be the same question as the blessing question but the forgetting God question that struck a cord for many of us.

In our scripture today Moses reminds the Israelites of what wealth they have, what they have to be thankful for. The Israelites are not known for their thanksgiving and praise. If you know anything about the Israelites from Biblical history, you probably remember that they weren't all that much different from us in many ways. Despite all the ways God had taken care of them, there are many occasions we read of when their mouths were filled with grumbling and their minds were filled with dissatisfaction. Moses' confronts this in his farewell address to the Israelites. Moses' death was approaching, and he takes some time to reminisce and reflect back to how God had lead the Israelites out of Egypt through guidance and powerful miracles. He had been their leader through 40 years of wandering in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land. Which also meant he had been the

recipient of the frequent complaints and concerns of the Israelite people throughout those years. And now, as he stood before the nation, about to cross over into the Promised Land, Moses talks about thankfulness, contentment, and satisfaction. He reminds them and us to live in gratitude for how God has carried us through the wilderness, out of slavery, into new life.

For most of us when we think about what we are thankful for the first things that come to mind are people and/or possessions. Friends and relatives, possessions and blessings that make our lives easier – those are what bring contentment and satisfaction, those are what make us thankful, and rightfully so. They are great blessings that many of us have and we should not take that for granted.

But if our entire reason for thanksgiving is based on people and possessions, likely, we will never be completely satisfied.

Why? Because we always seem to be one person or possession away from real contentment? If I can just get enough stuff, if I can just save up for that one purchase, if I can just gather enough friends, or have a good enough relationship, then I will be happy, then I will be fulfilled, and thankful.

But that isn't entirely true is it? You know this. You get a raise or a Christmas bonus or something, and lo and behold, you still aren't happy. Instead, you have now discovered it was actually something else that was the key to happiness, and so you need that. Then you'll be thankful. And the cycle continues. If the reason for thankfulness was simply a matter of having enough stuff or the right people in your life, then honestly most of us should be the most thankful people in the world. But we aren't, in fact North Americans to much of the world are seen as the most dissatisfied. A colleague shared a story the other day that he was doing a walk with children talking about abundance and he asked them "Where do you have abundance in your life?" His six year old said 'money' He nearly fell over. We don't have money he thought.... And then he thought again. It's all about perspective isn't it.

It's nothing new and quite frankly it is the world and culture most of us grew up in so it is pretty hard to shake.

But Moses cautioned the Israelites against this very same trap of looking to possessions, wealth, and fun as the key to a thankful attitude. He said: don't forget where your wealth and good land and abundance came from. Watch out so that your heart does not become arrogant and forget ... your God. It really doesn't take a great deal of searching to find what we are missing on those days when a thankful attitude seems kind of hard to find. Moses say's Do not forget the LORD, who led you in the great and terrifying wilderness, where there were venomous

snakes and scorpions, where the thirsty ground had no water, but the LORD made water come out of a flint rock for you. God cared for the Israelites, often in rather spectacular ways, and they still grumbled.

Is it the same thing for you and me today? Think of how God has taken care of us. Personally when I pause I realize how God has carried me through this year. How I have stayed safe and healthy, how my family has been protected throughout the world. Not everyone can express that and so I give thanks that God is way ahead of me. That I don't have to control the outcomes and if I do fall ill, or someone I love falls ill God will still be there, God will guide us and help us through the most difficult journey in the wilderness. That is what I don't want to forget when days get hard. When we pause to think, we can see that God has blessed us richly in very direct ways. It's something to be thankful for.

As the Israelites Can you imagine going to sleep at night without a scrap of food to eat the next day, waiting for the morning appearance of Manna, that miraculous bread from heaven? I know it is true for me and know it has been true for many of you it is often in those hard times that we are able to come to God and feel comfort and peace. The other day a few colleagues said "I feel closer to God than I ever have, because I have remembered that I have to rely on the holy to get us through, it's not about me on my own, God is in control and ahead of us."

Moses also advised the Israelites to remember that God is the one who gives you the ability to produce wealth, to confirm his covenant that he promised to your fathers with an oath, as he does to this day. Usually covenants are two sided promises – it would be only fair if God chose to bless us in proportion with the thanksgiving and praise that he expected to receive. It would be only fair if God called for a return of thanks from us on his investment. But God isn't like that, and that's the real reason for Thanksgiving, no matter what we might see in the rest of our lives. This covenant isn't a two sided agreement where we have to bring something to the table and then God will accept us. This covenant is a covenant of God's unconditional love for sinful, thankless people like you and me. It's the covenant God kept when he sent his son Jesus into our world to live among sin and wickedness, to model perfect thankfulness in our place every day of his life. And it's a covenant of undeserved love that God continues to keep by providing so much more than we deserve. God's covenant with you and me: that's the real reason for thankfulness in every situation.

And so no matter how much or how little we might have in terms of material goods or friends or health, we can be thankful, because even when life is filled with difficulties, we can be thankful because God journeys even closer to us in the struggles when we allow and acknowledge God with us. For me this year this is the

real reason for Thanksgiving, that God is with us, ahead of us, within us, loving and guiding us, into the promised land.

Amen.