

“The Contours of Gratitude”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for October 13th 2019 (18th after Pentecost/Thanksgiving Sunday)
by Foster Freed

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11

Let’s begin...let’s begin with our text...and with the reminder...

...the reminder that the Bible’s fifth-book, Deuteronomy—which is also the final book in the Torah, the “Five Books of Moses”—let’s begin with the reminder that Deuteronomy is set just prior to the death of Moses, just prior to Moses’ passing the mantle of leadership on to Joshua and thereby, just prior to the Israelite’s entry into the land of promise. That, of course, accounts for the somewhat provisional nature of the instructions given here by Moses...

...provisional in the sense that he lays-out actions they are to undertake not immediately, but once they have arrived in the land promised to them.

And yes: at a bare minimum this poignant ritual of “first fruits”, complete with a script to be recited as those “first fruits” are offered...

...A wandering Aramean was my father...!

...that lovely ritual, at a bare minimum, offers a clear indication that the celebration of the harvest—what we here in North America call Thanksgiving—while technically not a specifically Christian festival, can most certainly claim deep Biblical warrants. And that is why, far from being uneasy with our celebration of Thanksgiving inside this sanctuary, we—of all people—should recognize the essential rightness of bringing our “first-fruits” to God and celebrating the harvest in “word-and-song”. In short, the essential rightness of thanks-giving...the essential rightness of expressing gratitude for harvest...the essential rightness of turning to God and learning to say “thank you” for all life’s blessings. All of that is fully justified on the basis of our faith story. And yet: a life of gratitude...a life of “thanksgiving”, is not without its complexities, its complications and its challenges.

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When I refer...as my title this morning refers...to the “contours” of gratitude...it is precisely those complexities, complications and challenges I have in mind. For starters...for starters there is the question of **how** we best offer thanks: which is to say, where gratitude is concerned, our words, minus corresponding actions, tend to have a hollow ring about them. I have more than once heard—and perhaps have more than once myself made use—of the distinction between “thanks-giving” and “thanks-living”...a distinction which, while hardly the stuff of great poetry, most certainly points to the limits of language, the limits of words, when it comes to offering thanks in ways that do justice

to the gratitude we hope to express. That having been said: I actually believe the distinction between gratitude-spoken versus gratitude-lived is a distinction United Church of Canada folk instinctively grasp. It's not that we always get it right, simply that we are a very practical people who clearly get the distinction between lip-service and life-service. Even when we fall short of the mark—even when we fall far short of the mark—we tend to know in our bones that the gratitude we express with our lips must also be embodied in our lives. But there's more.

Perhaps a deeper challenge...a deeper spiritual challenge...is one we encounter when times are hard, when our lives take a turn for the worse. Our own illness...or the illness of a loved one. The sudden loss of a job and the income it was bringing in. The unexpected loss of a relationship. The list of things that can throw us off course is an inexhaustible list! Any one of them can suddenly cause gratitude to become an effort...perhaps a herculean effort as we find ourselves—in Job-like fashion—far readier to curse our fate than to count our blessings. And, frankly, that doesn't even begin to do justice to the cynicism that can crawl into our psyches when tough times linger and persist. At such times gratitude can seem to be the most unnatural of possibilities. And yet, ironically, gratitude can **also** be problematic even when everything seems to be unfolding just as we would wish for it to unfold.

After all: when all is going well, we can spend an awful lot of our psychic energy looking over our shoulder, wondering when the other shoe will drop and things turn sour. Worse still, we can feel a certain guilt about the good things that have come to us: the uneasy sense that there is something off-key when we offer thanks when times are good and my cup overflows with blessing. What precisely does it say about me and what does it say about God...as I give thanks for my full-belly...when there are neighbors both distant and close-at-hand who are hungry? What does it say about me and what does it say about God as I give thanks for good health, as my neighbour slowly succumbs to an inoperable cancer? And yes: that question can be reframed to fit any number of situations, in which the very act of offering thanks—**specific** thanks for **specific** blessing received, for **specific** prayers answered—can raise nagging questions: not only about God's role in our day-to-day lives, but questions about the many prayers that appear not to have been answered, about the many blessings desired, but seemingly never received. Does the act of thanks require us to put on rose-coloured glasses with which to see the world...with which to erase anything that might undermine our fragile toe-hold on gratitude?

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Well. That the offering of thanks turns out to involve more than may initially meet the eye...that a life of gratitude offers numerous challenges and raises unavoidable questions and concerns...does not change the fact that gratitude (for all of the complexity attached to it) is an essential dimension of the Christian life and—quite frankly—an essential dimension of **any human life** worth living. Surely we are all quite clear—at the stage of life at which most of us have arrived—that “resentment”, “envy” and “bitterness” are poisonous to the growth of the human soul. And surely we are **also**

aware that the offering of thanks, the expression of gratitude, is one of the surest ways of pushing back against the onslaught of “resentment”, “envy” and “bitterness.” Without pretending that life is always fair, without subscribing to the questionable proposition that “whatever doesn’t kill us makes us stronger”, the fact remains: a determination to render thanks—even when times are tough—increases the likelihood that we will notice the things in our life that are right, even when a whole lot is going wrong. While there is nothing virtuous about pretending that “all is well” when we know in our bones that “all is not well”, neither is there any reason to take pride in an inability to recognize the flashes of divine-goodness and yes, the flashes of human-kindness that can infiltrate even the bleakest day. There may be much more to the life-of-faith than resolving to “count your blessings/name them one-by-one”...but frankly, such a practice is not a bad starting point. And yes: while the counting of blessings is an activity in which anyone can engage, there are, nevertheless, very specific resources available from within the central Christian story...resources that can provide perspective and focus when we—as disciples—seek to find our way along the road that leads to gratitude.

Two of the “resources” to which I am referring, are on display in that reading from Deuteronomy: having to do with our Christian mandate to live out our days “between memory and hope.” In terms of **memory**, consider the words that were to be spoken as first-fruits were presented. “*A wandering Aramean was my father...*” likely a reference either to Abraham or to Jacob or possibly to them both. Either way, those words invite us—as they invited the ancient Israelites before us—to recognize the distance we have travelled in this life of ours, as those who came into this world naked: dependent upon our Creator for our first breath...and each and every subsequent breath. Gratitude is not the only way in which we can respond to so great a debt...but it is not a bad starting point. Living between memory and hope...and with the determination to remember who we are and whence we came, is a powerful goad to a life of gratitude.

As for the place of **hope** in that equation, consider the Israelites to whom Moses offered that sermon at the end of their 40 years in the wilderness. I wonder how many of them experienced little more than resigned skepticism, as Moses—that day—outlined the grandeur of the future that was to be there’s. And yet over and over again, the Biblical story—culminating with Christ’s resurrection—demonstrates God’s remarkable ability to overcome both our skepticism and our resignation! It is no accident that so many of the great spirituals created by—and kept alive—by generations of black-slaves and their descendants, are rooted in the story of the Israelite’s escape from bondage. Those spirituals—whatever else they embody—embody the hope of a people who appeared to be beyond hope: beyond hope and frankly beyond any circumstance that should have warranted gratitude. And yet offer thanks they did, because the one thing that neither their circumstances nor their enemies could take from them was a living hope: their certainty that God was for them and that—in the end—their God would vindicate them. To live in such hope...indeed to live between memory and hope...shines a light on even the bleakest of circumstances, making it possible for us—against all odds—to express our gratitude, to offer our thanksgiving. But, of course, there is one further thing...which may initially strike a discordant note...but it may actually be Ground Zero when it comes to a life of gratitude for those who know Christ!

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Consider...consider the Cross. Indeed: I sometimes wonder...wonder if we Christians, when we present our first-fruits, instead of saying "A wandering Aramean was my father" ought to say "A wandering Judean was my Savior!"? I suspect that way of formulating thing would serve as something of a wake-up call. I also suspect it would leave us no choice but to make room—even on this Harvest Festival—for the central affirmation of our faith: Jesus Christ, and him crucified!

And yes, I realize: I know full well that we Protestants tend to prefer our Crosses empty; even on Good Friday we tend to see the devotional practices of our Catholic sisters and brothers as somewhat over-the-top. And yet I must confess: must confess that I found myself pondering—over the past week—the common medieval practice of placing a small crucifix...

...**not** any empty cross but a fully loaded crucifix...

...the common medieval practice of placing such a crucifix in the sight-lines of a dying person on their death-bed, possibly right in front of them. I know that seems morbid at first glance: but when you think more deeply about it, doesn't that practice embody a deep spiritual wisdom: offering in our hour of ultimate need, the concrete, embodied reminder that this Jesus—Son of Man/Son of God—walked this way before me and walks it still **with** me: choosing to experience all of the pain and degradation life can offer...thereby offering the most potent reminder that none of us is ever truly alone, even in our dying hour. That in life...in death...in life beyond death, God is present with and to us. And that, even better than the miraculous truth about our living in God's world....stands the Gospel's insistence that God-in-Christ has chosen to live in our world. And surely that leaves us, in-and-out of season, no choice but to offer our thanks and our praise...no choice but to offer the glory to God.

And glory be to God, whose power working in us—on the worst of days no less than on the very best of days—can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation, in the Church and in Christ Jesus, now and forever more.

Thanks be to God!