

20 November 2016

The Thanksgiving Shift
Philippians 1:3-11; Deuteronomy 14:22-29

The Apostle Paul could be irritable, short-tempered, and whiney – for instance in Galatians and 2 Corinthians. So it's interesting that his letter most marked by joy and gratitude is one he wrote in prison, while he awaited death. We read Philippians 1:3-11:

3 I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Every ancient culture had some sort of a harvest festival, and so did the Israelites. Israel's was different, though. Where others treated the harvest festival as a duty, a payment to ensure good harvests from the fickle gods, the Israelites held a thanksgiving festival, such as the one described in Deuteronomy 14:22-29:

22 Set apart a tithe of all the yield of your seed that is brought in yearly from the field. ²³In the presence of the Lord your God, in the place that he will choose as a dwelling for his name, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flock, so that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always. ²⁴But if, when the Lord your God has blessed you, the distance is so great that you are unable to transport it, because the place where the Lord your God will choose to set his name is too far away from you, ²⁵then you may turn it into money. With the money secure in hand, go to the place that the Lord your God will choose; ²⁶spend the money for whatever you wish—oxen, sheep, wine, strong drink, or whatever you desire. And you shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your household rejoicing together. ²⁷As for the Levites resident in your towns, do not neglect them, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you.

28 Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns; ²⁹the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake.

Over the first two days of July in 1863, 51,000 Americans were killed or maimed at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Three months later, on October 3, President Abraham Lincoln issued a decree

calling for the last Thursday of November to be “a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens.” In the midst of war, he calls for thanksgiving.

Over the past eighteen months we have heard a lot of talk about the imminent collapse of our nation and all its democratic institutions and noblest ideals if Hillary Rodham Clinton or Donald J. Trump were elected president. Which one would cause this cataclysm depended on who you talked to. If I may do so respectfully, allow me to point out that if you’re looking for a time when the American experiment was genuinely in danger of falling apart, 1863 feels like a better bet than today. On any given day in that year, anywhere from a few dozen to tens of thousands of Americans were killed by other Americans. And *that* was the year that Abraham Lincoln issued his Thanksgiving decree.

It’s a remarkable document. It begins, “The year that is drawing towards its close, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies.” President Lincoln begins by acknowledging the simple gifts of the earth, not with the crisis of the war. No, he’s not playing Pollyanna’s “Glad Game,” trying to think happy thoughts no matter what. No, this is not a particularly morbid exercise in the Power of Positive Thinking. Later in the decree, he speaks openly and clearly about the horrors of the war around them. He even refers to his conviction that the war is a divine punishment on the nation for its sin of slavery. But he begins with thanks. The land yields crops, the mines produce ore, the mills weave cloth, children are born, foreign nations have not taken advantage of the American war to invade, laws are still being obeyed, people are building new homes, hope has not died. These things, he says, are not the fruit of our own labor, they can only be understood as gifts from a merciful God. President Lincoln schedules this day of Thanksgiving for harvest time, when the wonder of growing food and bounty is most clearly before us. He calls on the people to give thanks, and then to repent of their sins, and then to make sure that the widows, orphans, mourners, and survivors of the war are cared for. Finally, he calls on the American people to “fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation.”

One thing that strikes me about this 153-year old decree – because I’m a Bible nerd – is how closely it corresponds to the description of the harvest festival in ancient Israel, found in Deuteronomy 14. This festival of first fruits, like our Thanksgiving, is held at harvest time and is above all a celebration of God’s bounty, regardless of external circumstances. Here too we are reminded that the blessings of the earth are not what we deserve but are gifts from a good God. The people come together in thanksgiving *that [they] may learn to fear the Lord [their] God always* (v. 23). Now in Deuteronomy the festival involves bringing a gift to God – ten percent of the year’s harvest. This “tithe” was to be taken to the central shrine. If an Israelite lived too far from the shrine to transport crops conveniently, then he could sell that ten percent and just bring money to the temple. I’ll come back to that ten percent thing later, but first we should notice what is to be done with that offering. *With the money secure in hand, go to the place that the Lord your God will choose; spend the money for whatever you wish – oxen, sheep, wine, strong drink, or whatever you desire. And you shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your household rejoicing together.* Bring your gift to the Lord, and then have a feast with it. Really? This isn’t giving to support the temple? No, not primarily. It’s a celebration. It’s a feast just like the people might have had to celebrate the harvest at home, except for one thing: *you shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God.* And as you eat your feast – your

oxen, sheep, wine, strong drink, or whatever you desire – remember to share it with others. Share it with the Levites – that’s the clergy – because, remember, they don’t have real jobs. And above all, remember *the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns* (v. 29).

See what I mean about how this corresponds with President Lincoln’s Thanksgiving idea? You’d almost think he read about something like that somewhere.

So we’re going to go from here to a party in the Parlor, but before that, a brief reflection on thanksgiving. Genuinely giving thanks may be the most powerful shift in perspective that we can experience. When we start with thanks, when we open our eyes to the bounty we have been given, we realize that whatever our current crisis may be, it is not the end of history. The God who continues to give us “the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies” will be here long after this crisis is past. After the next one, too. When we say “God is good, *all the time*,” you know that includes now, right? Second, no matter how bad things are, how tight our budget, how little we’re living on – we have enough to share with those who have less. Indeed, that’s the whole point of having anything to start with, to be able to share with others and in so doing to celebrate in the presence of the Lord our God.

In fact, a curious thing about thankfulness is that it appears to be easiest for those who have the least. Paul’s exclamations of thanksgiving and rejoicing in Philippians are remarkable precisely because they are uttered from a prison cell, at just the time that we would think he had least to be grateful for. But whether we have little or much, we all need the shift of perspective that comes from giving thanks. We must all cultivate the habit, and the best way to learn how to give thanks for what we have is to learn how to give it away.

I said earlier that I would come back to the notion of the “tithe,” that ten percent standard that is specified in Deuteronomy. Now, as many of you may remember, I reject most of the tithing theology that is usually taught. I do not believe we must tithe because it’s in the Old Testament law, because we are not bound to the Old Testament law, and we don’t have the right to pick and choose a few laws out of the mix to impose on people because they’re convenient for us. As for the prosperity gospel teaching that God is obligated to bless all who tithe with even greater wealth, that’s not just wrong but abhorrent. But you know what? I tithe. Not as a duty and not as an investment, but because that percentage works. It is not so much to be a deep hardship, but it is enough that it does require sacrifice. There are things I don’t buy or do because that money is spoken for. Some of you know the name Dave Ramsey – the author of the Financial Peace University program. Well, he also has a radio program and podcast on financial questions, and a few weeks ago I happened to come in on the middle of one of those – just in time to hear him say, “The best financial advice I can give is to tell people to tithe.” He hastened on to clarify that. He said it wasn’t anything magical, as if God had to bless tithers. Rather, he said, it’s because when you make a regular commitment to give at least that much, it helps you put money in perspective. You realize there are things that matter more than money, you don’t long for it as much, you don’t spend it as much, you actually end up saving more; you think less about what you don’t have, and you enjoy what you do have that much more.

That’s why a key element of Deuteronomy’s thanksgiving festival is giving. As we celebrate our bounty, we share with others so they too can celebrate in the presence of the Lord our God. That’s why the church is here – or should be why: so that people can celebrate together

in the presence of God. And that's why we pledge from our own bounty to support it. No, not to support *it*. We don't give to the church as to something external to us. We who give to the church are not so much benefactors of an institution as we are a group of friends pooling their money for a party – then inviting strangers, foreigners, orphans, widows, mourners, and those wounded by our current war to celebrate with us. For God has been good to us. Today we give thanks.