

“Gratitude” – October 13, 2019
REV. ELIZABETH CUNNINGHAM
Stouffville United Church

Thanksgiving Sunday
Deuteronomy 26, Psalm 100, Phil 4, John 6

Moses tells us, When you have come into the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruits of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at the time, and say to him, “Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us.” When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, you shall make this response before the Lord your God” which is followed by the wandering Aramean story. (Deuteronomy 26:1-5)

Part of the rationale behind the instructions given in this passage from Deuteronomy, the reason why they are celebrating so much is that to a people who were always on the move, to be blessed with the time in which to stay in one place long enough to have a crop, to harvest it and have stores of food for the winter ahead was somewhat of a miracle to their travelling way of life.

I know some of you will have had a childhood and maybe adulthood life where you moved frequently. I think of people in the Armed Forces who are transferred frequently. My mother moved frequently because my grandfather was a mine manager in Northern Ontario and Quebec and she moved a lot. As I grew up in the one house in Thornhill, and my mother still lives in it, I don’t know what it means to pick up and move every few years. It must be hard to root up that which was starting to find roots and to begin again in a different place.

While some of you here are farmers and gardeners, you can find an ear of corn or a bunch of beets to put in the basket. But those of us who are not farmers or gardeners, what will be our offering? I’m going to suggest we will all place our gratitude in the basket, our thankfulness for the abundance in our lives, being cognizant of the great disparity between our culture and that of so many countries around the world. Our shopping carts in Stouffville, whether No Frills, Longs, Metro, Walmart or Reesors, are filled with a plenteousness that will not be found in other places in this world.

The Israelites, in this ritual of offering the first fruits, were in essence taking the top off their harvest, giving the first crop off the land, off the fruit trees, and giving that to God. It would be the same as giving to God the first dollars off our pay cheques instead of ‘what’s left over’ after we’ve spent it on everything else. It’s giving that *first bit* to God that is central in this text.

A commentary helped me to understand what were the ‘first fruits’, “According to Jewish tradition, first fruit offerings were made of seven species native to the land: wheat, barley,

grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates (*Mishna Bikkurim* 1.3). Knowing this may encourage us to locate ourselves within our own particular contexts today, giving thanks and offering what we have been uniquely given by God for the prospering of our neighbors and the larger community. What might be our first fruits? Our time. Our ‘talents’, as in gifts of ministry. Our prayers. Our watching out for others, to lend a hand, to help in a time of need. Our volunteering? What do we give back to God?

Reading this passage from Deuteronomy emphasizes a time when the people were in great need, as they wandered and wandered, with no place to call home. My commentary offered, “The memory of being landless and vulnerable ... cultivates an ethic of empathy as the basis for including those currently landless and vulnerable. God’s inclusive generosity embraces us all, to be experienced again and again as together we share bread, wine, food, and everything else that supports and enhances life.”¹ So in times of abundance, we remember the vulnerable.

Yesterday, I saw too many Facebook posts of people showing their turkeys in the roasting pan, ready to go into the oven. And these were enormous birds. I don’t want to lose sight of the fact that this weekend, is about being thankful to God for the little things and not just the turkeys going in the oven that are so important.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “We pray for the big things and forget to give thanks for the ordinary, small (and yet really not small) gifts.”² Henri Nouwen goes further, itemizing those gifts, “The little love we have, the little knowledge we have, the little advice we have, the little possessions we have, are given to us as gifts to God to be given away. The more we give them away, the more we discover how much there is to give away. The small gifts of God all multiply in the giving.”³

Psalm 100 is a psalm of great celebration. A commentary writes, “The psalmist invites all to come with demonstrations of joy and gratitude, offering no formulas or rituals that must be observed. All that is required is sheer joy and thanksgiving, displayed with sound of voice and instruments.”⁴ Psalm 100 is a two-part call to worship. Verses 1-3 most likely took place outside the temple walls, while verses 4-5 were offered inside the temple in preparation for the sacrifice of thanksgiving.

Here is a different version of our Psalm through the Message translation: “On your feet now – applaud God! Bring a gift of laughter, sing yourselves into his presence. Know this: God is God, and God, God. He made us; we didn’t make him. We’re his people, his well-tended sheep. Enter with the password, “Thank you!” Make yourselves at home, talking praise. Thank him. Worship him For God is sheer beauty, all-generous in love, loyal always and ever.”

Verse 3 reads, “Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.” As a commentary explains, “These phrases highlight a

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1607

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 29

³ Henri Nouwen, *Jesus - A Gospel*, 54.

⁴ *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 3, Exegetical Perspective*, 131.

connection between the people and God that indicates *belonging*. These phrases remind us that the identity of the people of Israel was intricately woven to their relationship with God.”⁵

“The Psalms often became known by their opening Latin words. Our English “Make a Joyful Noise” for Psalm 100 is rendered in a single Latin word – *jubilare* – that resonates with English words such as “jubilation” and “jubilee.” Hence, the psalm also serves as a persistent reminder that our worship should always be marked by the deepest and most profound joy.”⁶

There is a famous setting of Psalm 100, Called, ‘The Old One Hundredth’, set by Ralph Vaughan Williams, as the processional hymn for the coronation service of Queen Elizabeth II at Westminster Abbey in 1953. “When the choir processes singing “All creatures that on earth do dwell,” one gets a sense of the type of ritual that Psalm 100 depicts. A cathedral full of voices along with organ, brass, and percussion have a stirring effect. As the procession moves forward, our emotions are carried along as well. The psalm and Vaughn Williams’s arrangement of it witness the power of sound and movement working together to glorify God.”⁷

As the Message translation reminds us, ‘Thank you’ is the pass word to the temple. Thank you God; for all the blessings you have poured into our lives with such abundance and grace. Thank you God, for the gifts, both great and small, but mostly we And, thank you God for the greatest gift of all – your Son, Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵ Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 3, Homiletical Perspective, 129-131.

⁶ Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 3., Theological Perspective, 132.

⁷ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3325