

Gratitude

Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen

Thanksgiving Sunday – Oct. 10, 2021

Scripture: Joel 2:21-27; Psalm 126; Matthew 6:25-34

Hymns: VT 114 – Now Thank We All Our God; VT 124 – For the Fruit of All Creation

VT 117 – We Give Thanks unto You

Joel 2:21-27

Do not fear, O soil; be glad and rejoice, for the LORD has done great things! Do not fear, you animals of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; the tree bears its fruit, the fig tree and vine give their full yield. O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the LORD your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before. The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you. You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame. You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the LORD, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame.

Matthew 6:25-34

²⁵“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ ³²For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

Psalm 126

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them."
The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.
Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb.
May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.
Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

This is our second year in a row celebrating Thanksgiving with the pandemic raging around us. Gratitude might not be the first thing on our minds. We're tired of this pandemic, tired of worrying about the health of our loved ones, tired of worrying about masks and distancing and whether or not it's safe to leave our homes, tired of people who refuse to get vaccinated for the common good, tired of the uncertainty and of adapting to new waves and variants and all of it. We're tired. And frustrated. And yet today we are called to be grateful. We might be wondering, how exactly is that supposed to work?

In her memoir about being a foster parent, *Stranger Care: A Memoir of Loving what Isn't Ours*, Sarah Sentilles talks about the grief and gift of her experience loving a little girl named Coco, who goes home with her and her spouse at just 3 days old as their foster daughter.¹ The couple falls absolutely in love with this little baby, to the point of wanting to adopt her. But the foster care system with which they are working sees reunification with birth parents – not adoption into a safe and loving home – as the highest priority. So Sarah must live with the painful uncertainty of not knowing whether or not they will be raising Coco, or how long she will be in their lives. But as she ponders this question, Sarah comes to the realization that all relationships are like this, to a degree. We never know how much time we will have with our loved ones, so we must take the risk of “loving what isn't ours.” She learns that control and ownership have no place in love. And that a biological, genetic relationship is not the only way to become a family, as she feels a powerful sense of family and belonging with her foster daughter, who was previously a stranger. Citing a scientific study about people who

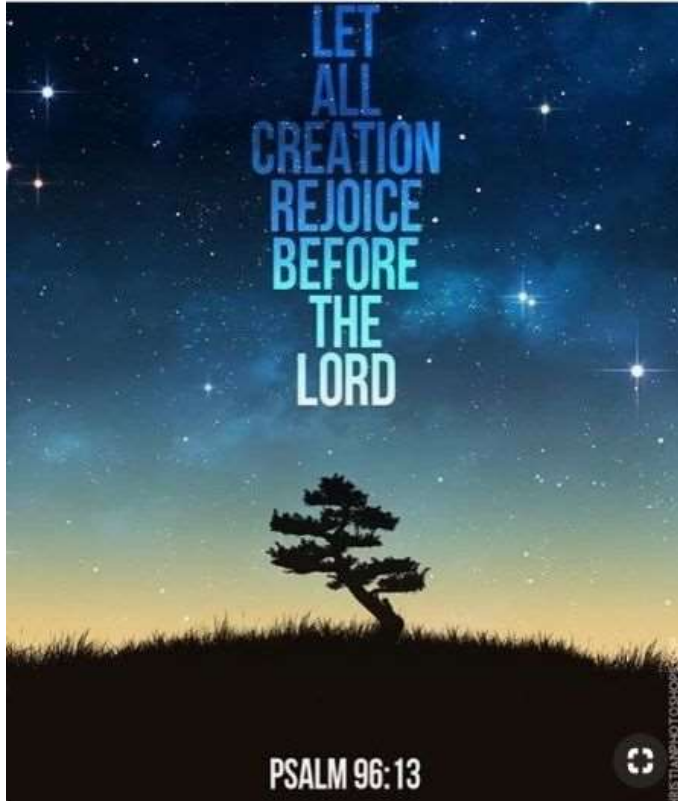
¹ Sarah Sentilles, *Stranger Love: A Memoir of Loving what Isn't Ours* (New York: Random House, 2021). For an article by Sentilles about this experience, visit <https://cupofjo.com/2021/05/foster-mother-story/>

donate an organ to a stranger, she talks about how the place in their brain that gives rise to empathy is larger than average. She writes, “They are more sensitive to distress, scientists say. But ... how do scientists know it’s not the giving itself that transforms the brain? Maybe what renders you more sensitive to the suffering of others is having one of your organs in someone else’s body. Maybe it’s knowing there’s no such thing as *mine*.”² In other words, we do not own each other, but we do belong to each other, and to God. And we can be grateful for the time that we do have together, and for this deep sense of belonging.

There is a thread running through the Bible that emphasizes this sense that we do not own each other or the land or even God’s favour. Think of Psalm 24:1 – “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it.” Or Leviticus 25:23 – “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens [strangers] and tenants.” This is a very different kind of spirituality to the so-called “prosperity gospel” that preaches health, wealth, and happiness if we only do certain things a certain way. This spirituality offers far fewer guarantees and is less concerned with making watertight contracts with God about what God “owes” us. But even without the certainty of ownership and control, this spirituality concerns itself with gratitude as a spiritual practice.

A couple of the Scripture passages for today link gratitude to creation in some interesting ways. Our passage from Joel begins with addressing all of creation – human and non-human alike – as equals before God. It begins by telling the soil – the soil! – to “fear not,” and “be glad and rejoice.” It has the same message for the animals: “Do not fear, you animals of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; the tree bears its fruit, the fig tree and vine give their full yield.” And it is only then that it speaks

² Sentilles, *Stranger Care*, 331.



to the “children of Zion,” recounting what God has done for them: given them rains that ensured a good harvest of wheat and grapes and oil. God has set before them an abundant table, an image we’re familiar with this time of year. But notice what this passage does to the way we think about our relationship to creation – that we’re more important than the rest of creation, that it’s there to serve

us and our needs. This passage turns those assumptions on their heads, interrupting them with a sense of soil, animals, and human beings all part of creation, and equal before the God who made all of us. All of us are capable of rejoicing in gratitude to God our Creator!

Jesus’ familiar teaching from Matthew 6 calls us even more directly to learn from creation. Included in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, this is another reversal of our sense of superiority over the rest of creation. Jesus calls us to look to the birds and to the lilies and learn from them not to worry about our food or our clothing. Birds do not worry about growing and harvesting food, yet they are fed. Lilies are more beautifully clothed than royalty, yet they do not worry about spinning – or weaving, sewing or knitting for that matter! But I have to admit, I have always struggled with this passage, and the way it disapproves of worry, especially worry about basic necessities like food

and clothing. Sometimes worry is very understandable, and very human! We may even think of it as the responsible thing to do, especially if we're responsible for other people! For example, what kind of parent would I be if I never worried about my children's food or clothing? But maybe I'm overthinking this, as in this cartoon.



What if it's not about worry in general, but about an excess of worry, or worrying over things we can't control? There is a clue at the end of our passage, in verse 34: "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." That makes a huge difference in how we understand this passage, doesn't it? It's not that Jesus is forbidding us from ever worrying. Rather, Jesus reminds us to be mindful of the present, to

focus on today, to what is ours to worry about, and no more.

This is actually something that's really been helpful for me during this time of pandemic. With unpredictability and uncertainty as givens these days, it is impossible to focus on things I have no say in – at least, without great frustration and worry. The best thing we can do right now for our own mental health is to focus on today, on doing the

next right thing that is ours to do.³ Otherwise, we may get overwhelmed or consumed by worry. And if we do find ourselves being consumed by worry, or struggling to cope, it's so important to reach out for the support we need, whether that's a friend or family member with a listening ear, this church community, or counselling or medication. Reaching out for help when we need it is also a way of not letting ourselves be consumed with worry. So is a daily practice of gratitude, which can be amazingly grounding.

Recent studies have shown that gratitude has measurable benefits to our mental and physical health, which is fascinating. Apparently, gratitude can lower blood pressure, boost our immune systems, help regulate our cholesterol and stress hormones, help us become more emotionally resilient, help us sleep better, improve our relationships and overall sense of joy. That's incredible! And, of course, these aren't instant benefits – they come from a regular habit of practicing gratitude over time.⁴ I find it helpful to think of gratitude as a practice, as something that takes practice, like a muscle that one has to exercise to strengthen.

So contemporary science is proving the benefits of a very ancient practice, recorded in our Bible from thousands of years ago. And the ancient Israelites really had gratitude down to an art. One of my favourite forms of gratitude in the Hebrew Bible is found in our psalm for today, among others. A careful reading of Psalm 126 makes us aware of a shift in verb tense right in the middle. The first half is all in past tense (Israel has already been restored):

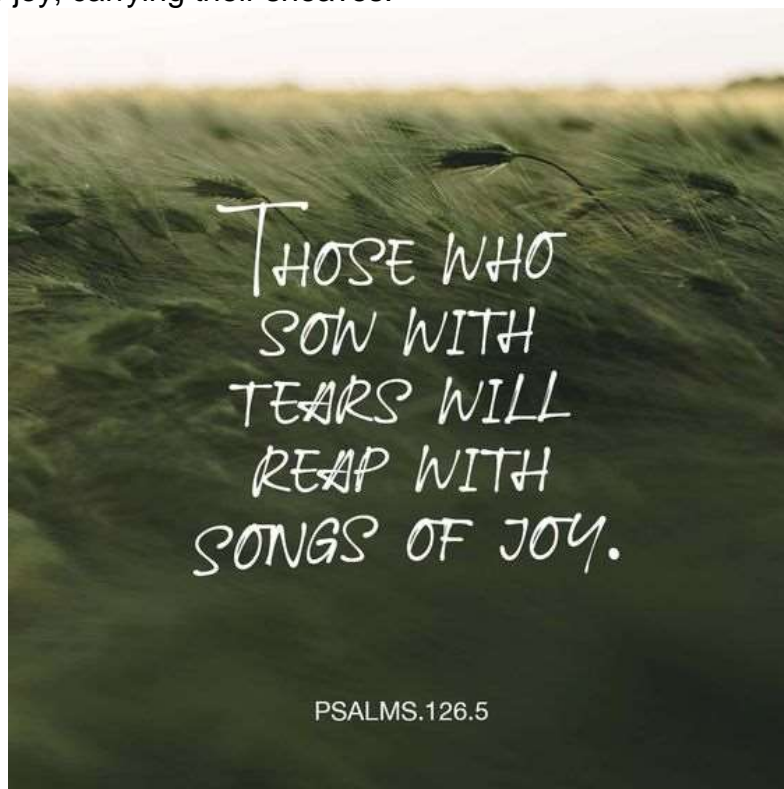
³ This section was inspired by my MC Sask colleague's reflections: see Rachel Wallace Facebook post, Sept. 1, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/wallace.rae/posts/10102880298397600>

⁴ Alissa Ellett, "Shocking News about Gratitude and Raising Healthy Kids," *Illustrated Ministry Blog*, 2018, <https://www.illustratedministry.com/2018/gratitude-healthy-kids/>

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them."
The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.

But then, the second half changes, and turns to asking God for restoration – so the restoration hasn't come yet:

Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb.
May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.
Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.



So what's going on here? Is this just a matter of a sloppy translation from the original Hebrew? It's not, given how many psalms make this move, which scholar Walter Brueggemann calls "one of the most startling in all of Old Testament literature."⁵ In expressing praise and rejoicing in God's salvation before it has even happened, the Israelites are expressing gratitude in advance for God's coming salvation, gratitude for

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 34.

what God is about to do. What a profound expression of faith and hope! Imagine trusting God so much that you rejoice in God's saving actions before they've even happened! Imagine being able to live in that kind of hope and faith, knowing that you belong to the God who saves, the God who delivers, the God of Life and Loving-Kindness.

So, in the spirit of the Psalms that are grateful to God in advance, I'd like to offer a few prayers of my own to close my sermon:

*I give praise to God our Creator
for the completed roof on our church building,
for the safe and efficient distribution of Covid vaccines
to all children under twelve.
I am grateful to God our Guide for leading us safely
through the twists and turns of this pandemic,
for steering us through its waves and variants,
for coming out the other side with relief and gladness.
I rejoice in God our Deliverer for the post-pandemic church, once again
gathered together in this sanctuary as a whole congregation,
joining our voices all together in song,
joining hands around the potluck tables,
passing around the beloved babies,
laughing and worshipping and visiting together
without fear.
Thanks be to God! AMEN*

Benediction: May the God of Deliverance go with you from this place, giving you hope for the journey. And be thankful. AMEN