

Giving Thanks

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Scripture: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 100

Hymns: VT 114 – Now Thank We All Our God; VT 122 – Sing to the God of Harvest; VT 123 – Come, Ye Thankful People Come

First Fruits and Tithes

26 When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, ² you shall take some of the first of all the fruit 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. ³ You shall go to the priest who is in office at that 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.’ ⁴ When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, ⁵ you shall make this response before the LORD your God: ‘A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. ⁶ When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, ⁷ we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. ⁸ The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; ⁹ and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰ So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.’ You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. ¹¹ Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

Psalm 100

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.

² Worship the LORD with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.

³ 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.

⁴ Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him, bless his name.

⁵ For the LORD is good;
his steadfast love endures for ever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

One of my regular practices during these past few years of pandemic has been gratitude. Each day, I remind myself of what I have to be grateful for. As a person who tends to look at things with a critical eye, this reminder is important, shifting my perspective to what is here, what is enough, what is good. I think it's really made a

difference in my overall outlook to practice gratitude regularly. Last year, I took this practice online and started listing one thing I'm grateful for each day on social media in the week leading up to Thanksgiving (and I'm repeating it this year). Some of them are really, really simple – community, garden produce, music, Fall colours. In a world that constantly feeds us messages of not having or being enough, it's truly liberating to say, "I have enough. I am enough. Today is enough."¹

In her book on prayer, faith writer Anne Lamott makes the case that the three "essential" prayers can be boiled down to just three words: "Help, Thanks, Wow."² In more formal terms, we might speak of these as prayers of petition (request), thanksgiving, and praise. Now of these three, prayers of thanksgiving might actually be the most familiar to us, the ones we pray most frequently. Most mealtime prayers are prayers of thanksgiving; we'll be praying those around the tables of the Thanksgiving feasts we attend this weekend as well! Many of us have a lot of practice giving thanks to God in prayer; gratitude has become a daily (maybe even three-times-a-day) habit.

Lamott puts it this way:

"A lot of us religious types go around saying thank you to God when we find a good parking space, or locate the house keys or the wandering phone, or finally get a good night's sleep. And while that may be annoying to the people around us, it's important because if we are lucky, gratitude becomes a habit."³

Gratitude starts to change the way we look at the world if we practice it enough. It becomes like strengthening a muscle. And we see what a difference this makes when things are going well in our lives. At those times, gratitude is downright easy. But if we practice gratitude, we also see what a difference it makes when things are difficult.

¹ These are similar to mantras from: Mary Jo Leddy, *Radical Gratitude* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 52-53.

² Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012).

³ Lamott, 48-49.

Barbara Brown Taylor makes the case that gratitude is not the same as optimism or toxic positivity – that is, positivity that denies the difficulties and the hard stuff simply because it’s negative. Gratitude is not about denial or silencing people who are struggling. In her book, *Grateful: The Subversive Practice of Giving Thanks*, Brown Taylor puts it this way:

“Gratitude is not ...like a secular prosperity gospel, one that denies pain or overlooks injustice, because being grateful does not ‘fix’ anything. Pain, suffering, and injustice – these things are all real. They do not go away. **Gratitude, however, invalidates the false narrative that these things are the sum total of human existence, that despair is the last word.** Gratitude gives us a new story. It opens our eyes to see that every life is, in unique and dignified ways, graced: the lives of the poor, the castoffs, the sick, the jailed, the exiles, the abused, the forgotten, as well as those in more comfortable physical circumstances. Your life. My life. We all share the ultimate gift – life itself. Together. Right now.”⁴

So gratitude does not erase the difficult things in our lives, but it helps us remember that they are not the last word. It gives us profound comfort and hope, and strength for those difficult journeys.

Anne Lamott shares a story of meeting two of her close friends, one of whom – Barbara – has Lou Gehrig’s disease or ALS – meaning that “she uses a walker, feeding tubes, and a computerized speaking voice called Kate that works through her iPad.” The three women get together and she talks about how life-giving it was to just be together: “We all got so happy. We talked about real things for an hour: life, death, families, feeding tubes, faith. I asked Barbara, who does not eat food anymore, ‘What are you most grateful for these days?’ She typed on her iPad, and Kate’s mechanical voice spoke for her: ‘The beauty of nature, the birds and flowers, the beauty of friends.’”

⁴ Quoted by Sarah Bessey, “Thanksgiving Check In,” *Sarah Bessey’s Field Notes*, Oct. 10, 2020, <https://sarahbessey.substack.com/p/thanksgiving-check-in>

Lamott concludes, “This is called radical gratitude in the face of whatever life throws at you.”

The other thing about gratitude, says Lamott, is that it spills over into acts of service. She says, “Gratitude begins in our hearts and then dovetails into behaviour. It almost always makes you willing to be of service, which is where the joy resides. It means you are willing to stop being such a jerk. When you are aware of all that has been given to you, in your lifetime and in the past few days, it is hard not to be humbled, and pleased to give back.”⁵ This gratitude-manifest-in-service is certainly reflected in our Scripture passages from today, all about offering the “first fruits” of the harvest to God. What strikes me as interesting in this passage is not only this call to offering or what we would call “giving back,” but also what the Israelites are instructed to say as they do so. This is no individualistic act of gratitude. They are essentially to recount their whole history as a people and give thanks to God for all of it! They speak of Jacob (the “wandering Aramean”), their time in Egypt as “aliens” or outsiders, their liberation from slavery by God, and their entry into the land of Canaan, flowing with milk and honey. Their long journey to this time of being able to give offerings to God is recounted. I like to imagine them ending this speech with a hymn like Psalm 100, giving thanks to God for love and faithfulness that go way, way back and last for all generations to come. And notice, too, who is all included in the feasting: “Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house” (v. 11).

⁵ Lamott, 56-57.

Of course, we know of many other biblical stories of feasting, especially from the Gospels. So much of Jesus' ministry occurred table-side – eating with all kinds of people, bringing them together around tables, was part of how he worked to nurture relationships and break down the barriers of his day – with joy, and food blessed and shared. As we celebrate Communion today – whether in this service or around our Thanksgiving tables – let's remember how radical gratitude really is. In some Christian traditions, this practice is called the Eucharist – a Greek word meaning “Thanksgiving,” related to the giving of grace. As we turn to the bread and cup of Communion, let us celebrate it as a true Eucharist, and be thankful. AMEN