

God gives generously to us

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey

at St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA, November 24, 2016

Thanksgiving Day (year C), Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Philippians 4:4-9; John 6:25-35

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 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, 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. 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." 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: "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. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. 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; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. 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. 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.

Philippians 4:4-9 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

John 6:25-35 When the crowd found Jesus on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Happy Thanksgiving! I'm so glad that you are here today to celebrate and give thanks to God for all that God has done for us so generously. Thanksgiving is one of my favorite holidays. And in a strange way, Thanksgiving is such an enduring holiday. Columbus Day and President's Day are now mostly for sales rather than celebration. But Thanksgiving endures.

Thanksgiving is not a holiday filled with cards and gifts and presents. Certainly, there is labor in providing a meal—and that effort is worth appreciating. Delicious Turkey that draws you in with smells that fill the house for hours beforehand. Stuffing, mashed potatoes, gravy, cranberry

sauce, pumpkin and pecan pie. Can't you just smell it already? But even more joy is found in the relationships that enjoy it—in the preparing, in the sharing, even in the cleaning and relaxing afterward together.

Think about it—this is not a meal of great delicacy—these are foods of simple hunters and farmers—turkey and root vegetables and canned or dried fruit. Thanksgiving is not about luxury or material abundance. Our joy is found not in a pile of material things, but in God's provision for our daily lives and the relationships that God gives us to fill those daily lives. God gives generously to us. So we rejoice and give thanks for the gifts of God.

Today's Old Testament reading describes a kind of Thanksgiving holiday for ancient Hebrews. When the harvest comes in, they are to start with thanksgiving. Instead of waiting for the end to see what is left over, they bring the first fruits of the harvest to the Lord. They remember how it was the Lord who brought them out of Egypt and gave them this fertile land that produced all these crops. So they worship God and give thanks to God so that they remember how God gave generously to them. Then they rejoiced! They took those first fruits and celebrated together! They even celebrated with the resident aliens in their land—the foreigners who were traveling through or living there to work. God gave generously to them, so they were generous in reply, and they rejoiced and gave thanks for the gifts of God, and shared them with others.

Paul's letter to the Philippians underscores this practice. He tells them "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say rejoice!...Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Paul knows that we have needs and concerns. Paul also knows how God gives generously to us. So he calls us to rejoice in the Lord and to start our prayers with thanksgiving to God for the gifts of God.

I find it easy to start my prayers with what I want and what I need (or at least what I think I need). But when I start with thanksgiving, it gives me a different perspective. It doesn't mean that my needs aren't still there. But I understand them better when I give thanks to God for the blessings that he has already given. When I approach God with thanksgiving, he opens my eyes to see so much more possibility, and so much more blessing and joy that I was blind to see before.

Paul writes "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." What a contrast to news media and social media these days! When it would be easy to fall into cynicism and sarcasm and negativity, a mindset of thanksgiving invites the power of God into our lives. And God gives us an even greater gift. Paul writes "The peace of God, which surpasses understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." God gives generously to us. So rejoice and give thanks for the gifts of God.

When I was in seminary at Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia, I got to know several priests from Africa—from Malawi and Ghana and Tanzania. VTS had a long tradition of

supporting the church in Africa and bringing over clergy to study here. These are not rich countries, and these clergy were not princes in their towns. When we took them to American grocery stores, you can imagine the culture shock. Imagine going from a village of limited resources to the vast aisles of Walmart! And here I am, griping because I can't find the particular flavor of granola I want for my Greek yogurt, with berries that I can buy year-round. Not because the berries grow year-round, but because we can fly them in from wherever they are in season. We forget what insane abundance is available even to Americans of modest means. And we certainly forget to be thankful—at least I do.

I've noticed that our appetite for more things is kind of insatiable. Maybe you've seen it at Christmas. It seems that the larger the pile of presents, the more ravenous kids can become. My brother says it is like piranha skeletonizing a cow... And then the moment arrives when all the presents have been opened and there is a sense of let-down, and someone asks "is that all?"

But you've probably seen the opposite kind of thing at Christmas—especially with younger kids. Sometimes, in the middle of all the latest expensive gadgets and flashy toys, kids seem to gravitate to the giant cardboard box that when empty can become a fort or spaceship or hiding place. Add crayons and balls of rolled-up wrapping paper, and that cardboard box becomes the greatest gift of Christmas!

What is the difference between that insatiable appetite for more stuff and the enduring joy we find in simple things? I think the difference is a kind of spiritual gift, isn't it? It is a spiritual gift given even to children, and a gift that we can cultivate in ourselves and in others. This gift is a kind of openness to God's blessing to us—and a willingness to look for God's blessing in our lives. This is part of the gift and response of thankfulness and thanksgiving. God gives generously to us. So we rejoice and give thanks for the gifts of God. And the blessings of God become even greater.

There is an opposite, of course. There is a spiritual malady that clouds our eyes from seeing God's grace in our lives. One of the toughest kinds of this spiritual disease is the pain and burden of loss. We feel loss in so many ways, and sometimes the holidays bring out that loss. Sometimes we try to fix loss by filling that hole with other things—filling that loss with replacements. But replacements don't really work. Loss requires not replacements, but healing. The more we heal, the more we are open to see the abundance we still have, and the possibility for new life ahead of us. This healing we can find in Jesus.

In today's Gospel reading, people are chasing Jesus around the countryside like paparazzi after a celebrity. But Jesus notices that they are only there to fill their bellies. They were there for the feeding of the 5000, and they want to see it again—or get more free food. So Jesus challenges them—what are you after? A quick fix? It will not last. But if you want the food that will last—if you want the bread from heaven that will leave you never hungry and never thirsty, the bread that leads to eternal life, then come follow me, Jesus says. "I am the bread of life," he says.

God's generosity is so much more than a temporary fix or a short-lived material gift. God gives generously to us the gift of forgiveness and new life in Jesus Christ. We are thankful for our provisions of food and home and health and security. But the gifts of God include so much more—gifts that enliven our lives—gifts of true life that is stronger than sin and death. Jesus tells the people to set their hearts not just on bread, but on the bread of life. Set your hearts not just on earthly contentment, but on the joy of knowing Jesus Christ and his power in your life. God gives these gifts generously to us. So we rejoice and give thanks for the gifts of God.

That's why you're here, isn't it? You know something of God's grace in your life. You know the life-giving joy of knowing Jesus and you want to rejoice and celebrate and give thanks to God for these, the best of all blessings. So rejoice and be thankful!

That is your mission that I send you home with today: rejoice and give thanks for the gifts of God. I also send you home with a second mission: share that blessing with others. As God tells the Hebrews, remember that it is the Lord who has blessed you so much. Celebrate with those first fruits you have dedicated to God—celebrate not only with family and friends, but with foreigners and strangers too. Share with others the source of your joy. Name for them that you are thankful for God's sustaining love in your life. Share the gift of Jesus at Thanksgiving and you share the bread of life. Share the spiritual gift of thanksgiving and you will share the peace that passes understanding. Share these gifts at Thanksgiving and you will have a true feast!

God gives generously to us. So rejoice and give thanks for the gifts of God!