

November 20 – Thanksgiving Sunday

Tell the Story

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Thanksgiving is one of those holidays that can be challenging. Everywhere you hear about gratitude and are told to be thankful. And right there is the problem. Thanksgiving, that genuine expression of gratitude, can't be commanded. You cannot turn it on like water at the spigot. At times it feels as if we are again six and are hearing our mothers say, "Now tell them thank you." You say the words but you don't really mean it or you say it and then feel guilty about the fact that you had to be reminded to say it. Let's face it, sometimes when November rolls around we are feeling anything but grateful. Thanksgiving is not something we are feeling right now and if we are honest we might feel a bit irritated at life, at church, at God or all three for telling us to say thank you! This is when this story from Deuteronomy is so helpful. It gives a foundation and a reason for giving thanks at all times.

Before we see how to be thankful in all situations let's lift up why giving thanks can be hard. Perhaps this year we have lost a loved one and are not looking forward to Thanksgiving dinner knowing there will be an empty place at the table. Holidays are one of those times that loss is most keenly felt. Maybe we or a loved one has heard a devastating report from the doctor and we now know life is measured in months instead of years, and we wonder if they or us will even be at the table next year. Perhaps this year our candidate did not win in the elections and we are fearful instead of grateful for our country and the electoral process. I am sure you can think of other examples of why the words, "O give thanks to the Lord!" feel like a scolding instead of being in harmony with your life.

So what do you do? Here, as I said we can get help from Deuteronomy. The people had gone down to Egypt. While there they had become a great nation. With God's help and the leadership of Moses they had left Egypt. After wandering in the wilderness for forty years they were ready to enter the Promised Land. This message was shared just before they crossed the river Jordan. It was anticipating that first harvest. What an exciting time that would be. No longer would they be wandering

nomads. They would have a home, fields, a place. Gratitude that first year would be easy. But they were to do it every year, even years when things were not so good. Times would come when what they were going through did not feel like a celebration of God's blessing, and yet they were to offer this sacrifice of thanksgiving.

This tells me there is something valuable in the repetition of saying thanks. The reason your mother told you over and over to say thank you, even when you did not feel like it, was to first of all teach you to be polite, but even more, I believe, hoping that in the constant repetition you would begin to feel gratitude. So saying thanks today, even if this is not one of those seasons where gratitude comes easily, has value and merit.

But there is more. This passage begins: "When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you." From the time of Abraham until now, God had promised them that they would inherit this land. Now it was happening. They were being reminded that God is faithful, that God loves them, and that God's promises are something to be relied upon.

So think of how God has been faithful to you in the past. That reminder will fill you with gratitude and hope. Recently we had time with Gwen, our miracle grandchild. On the last morning we got to take her to pick out a pumpkin for Halloween. We were riding the hay wagon back to the car when she snuggled into my chest. I thought of all the struggles she went through those first months of her life, how prayers of support kept her parents and grandparents going. Tears filled my eyes as I remembered how blessed we are and how faithful God is.

Secondly, they were to share some of the first fruits of the harvest. This was a reminder to them that all gifts come from God, and that we are only caretakers. In giving back to God we celebrate how much we receive. This always reminds me of the story where the pastor, during Children's time, was trying to explain giving a tithe of 10 percent of our income to God. One little voice rang out, "You mean we get to keep 90 percent!" When we are not feeling full of gratitude, giving of our time, our talents or our resources to help others is another way to feel gratitude. The most recent guidepost magazine has an article about a woman who, after going through a bitter divorce was

not looking forward to Thanksgiving. She felt anything but thankful. All of the family traditions were going to be a painful reminder of what had happened. So, that first Thanksgiving she volunteered to help serve others. Her young children were able to help serve as well. As she saw them serve up food, see the smiles on their faces, and on the faces of those they served, she began to feel gratitude. Now her extended family, 18 this year, all will help serve this meal and it has made the day a day of thanksgiving.

Finally, they were to share the story of their salvation from the time of Abraham. This seems a bit odd to our modern ears. Why go through the trouble of retelling a story that's been heard thousands of time before? Why recount the mighty deeds of God in the history of Israel? Those are all valuable questions, but one even more pertinent may be: Why not? Why not recall God's track record of grace in the life of Israel? It is easy to assume that the people of Israel were just as inclined as we are to forget the divine origin of their numerous gifts as the people of God. They were inclined, like we are, to imagine themselves as the source and end of all they had. They had to be reminded of the ways in which God fulfilled God's promises to their ancestors. They had to be reminded of God's faithfulness.

At the center of God's personality is a profound generosity. When it comes to blessing and loving the human family, God holds nothing back. Everything we have is a gift from God, because everything we have belongs to God. This is why we retell the story.

Think of how profoundly that can help us when we feel less than grateful. To tell our story of God's faithfulness, God's blessing, and God's generosity can help us see beyond the moment of crisis. I remember sitting with a woman just a few days before Thanksgiving. It had been a very tough few months in her life. Her husband of many years had just died from a long battle with cancer. One of her children had lost their job and their financial future was really shaky, and so would not be coming to see her this holiday. I was concerned that she would sit home alone and that was why I went to see her. I am not sure she even knew this passage from Deuteronomy but she was living it. She began by first retelling some of her life, where she had grown up and the wonderful Thanksgiving dinners she had helped her mom prepare. She went on to talking about

that first thanksgiving when a young man, who was to become her husband, came to eat. She talked about inviting her parents to their house and how she ruined the turkey. And the story went on of children and grandchildren being added to her table. When she got done she said, "I have been so blessed. God has been so good to me." Retelling the story was not, for her a moment of sadness, though there were some tears, but a reminder of God's love and blessings.

She then turned to me with a sparkle in her eyes and said, "Mom taught us that we should always invite someone to thanksgiving dinner. It was a way of blessing others. I haven't been able to do that for a few years because of my husband's health. I have four coming to dinner. It is going to be a great day!"

So yes, give thanks. When it comes easy, celebrate! When life is challenging remember the commands in Deuteronomy. Remember how God has always been faithfully with you. Think of how you can give back to others, for this truly helps us be filled with gratitude. And finally, keep telling the story of blessing until you feel blessed. See mom knew right. If you say thank you often enough and faithfully enough and pass that attitude forward you can feel deep and profound gratitude for God, for life, and much more, no matter what challenging things you might be feeling this day.