

October 13, 2019

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Reading: John 6.25-35

The Message: Thankful for Signs and Wonders

Giving Thanks is great; But for what? And how?

Thanksgiving:

This isn't the only suitable time of year to give thanks; but the average temperature is about to tumble; already we have heard ominous forecasts from the west so with coloured leaves and sun and walking weather, we can look back with thanks for the fruits and vegetables that have graced our tables and the local farmers who tend and harvest and share them.

There are other times to give thanks for the fruits of the earth. When a tomato or a zucchini emerges in our gardens, or the blackberries hang heavy, I still think it's kind of a small miracle, because we have brown thumbs.

Our oldest had her first vegetable garden this year -- she has a really green thumb. It was wonderful to see Rachel, her three year old go off down the garden to pick a cherry tomato and pop it into her mouth, reminding us of her mother, who at two would head off to the rhubarb patch at the farm, pick a stick of rhubarb, twist off the leaf, wipe the dirt off on her overalls and crunch away without a hint of sugar.

Thanksgiving weekend isn't the only time of year to give thanks for the earth; but it's a seasonal time to think of all the times all year that we've given thanks for the earth.

One of the main themes of the Hebrew scripture is Israel's connection to the land.

- God promises the land of Israel to Abraham's descendants;
- they escape from Egypt to go to the land that God has promised;
- they enter the land; they care for the land;
- They are exiled from the land; they return to the land.

At every Passover for a couple of thousand years Jews have recited the verses that we heard this morning from Deuteronomy:

'when we were in Egypt, we cried to the Lord; and the Lord heard us, and with a mighty hand, and with signs and wonders, the Lord brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And so we give thanks.'

And there are instructions for how to give thanks:

'You shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, ... 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.'

The great themes of our faith are all there in these few verses.

- God cares for God's people;
- God is the God of history who redeems us from our past
- God brings us safely to a better place;
- God is the God of the land, and brings forth good things for us.

And we give thanks.

There are some interesting things in common between a Biblical spirituality of the land and a First Nations' spirituality. There are First Nations ceremonies of offering firstfruits that resemble what God tells Israel to do in this passage from Deuteronomy.

A couple of weeks ago we were in New Mexico, where we spent time with some of the Pueblo peoples on their land and learned about their culture. Like the Iroquois people in southern Ontario, they were an agricultural people when the Europeans came, and they had the same "three sisters" of beans, squash, and corn.

But, unlike the Iroquois, they also had chili peppers, which in my view makes meals much more interesting. But corn is the most important. When they arise in the morning, if they're at all traditional, they sprinkle cornmeal as an offering, which resembles the grain offering in the Old Testament book of Leviticus.

In the summer they have a corn festival, with a sacred and complex corn dance. Cornmeal and corn pollen are offered and sprinkled on the dancers and the sacred objects, which resembles the offering of first fruits that we heard in the reading from Deuteronomy.

The Navajo picked up the ritual of sprinkling the best of the first harvest of corn back on the land when they became an agricultural people.

- [902 worship]:
 - And this necklace, a **squash blossom necklace** -- this is a stylized version of the squash blossom, is part of the way they show gratitude for the harvest.
- [10.30 worship]:
 - My **stole** contains clouds and rain in thanksgiving for the watering of the land and crops.

The sense that the identity of a nation is totally bound up with its attachment to the land is something you find both among our First Nations and with Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The common message, something that both the Pueblo, Navajo and Israel could say with one voice, is: the Creator gave us our land; we belong to it; our identity as a people depends on it; our physical survival depends on it; and our spiritual flourishing depends on it.

How do we offer thanksgiving to God for the land and its bounty in a fitting way today?

In our church thanksgivings, we too remember how we would be nothing if there were no God and no land, and where we lay symbols of the harvest in front of the church, and we offer prayers saying that it's particularly fitting to give thanks at the end of the season of harvest.

But I learned something of the history of the Haida people this summer, and I think their story teaches us how we can give thanks in our actions.

In 1986, the Haida economy relied primarily on lumber. Though they were working in the lumber industry, they realized their prosperity was destroying the very land that defined them and that, if they kept on accepting the way things were, they would have no life. Sacrificing security, they gave thanks by being protectors of the land and the waters. Their persistence led to a unique partnership between the government of British Columbia and the Haida people. Setting aside the concept of ownership of the land, they worked together to tend to the land. Now there are Haida guardians scattered over the islands of Haida Gwaii, and the focus of the people has shifted to develop a way of living that does not destroy what they have been given. There is still a lumber industry on Haida Gwaii, but it has not destroyed the land, the water or the people.

The Haida have much to teach Canada about how to live thankfully.

We are called to recognize that without God and without the land, we have no life.

The text of Deuteronomy tells the people of Israel that a large portion of the first fruits that they offer is to go to the widows and orphans and *resident aliens*, reminding us that the Israelites were not the first to populate their land. Those resident aliens were their First Nations. And so the text calls us to be thankful by doing justice for those who came before us.

The example of the Haida people points us to a role of protection and care of creation. Jesus calls us to look not only at being actively grateful for the provision of our material needs, but to give thanks for the food that endures for eternal life -- for the Bread of heaven which is Jesus Christ himself. And so we are thankful in our hearts for the bounties of creation, for tables of abundance, and for Jesus who brings us to this place and teaches us how to live in creation and with one another.

Neighbours near our place on Hay Bay were visiting last week. After church we made a pilgrimage to the Arboretum at the Royal Botanical Garden to gather seeds of native trees like pin oaks and tulip trees, chesnuts and maples. Michael planted them this week in an area one might call a nursery: carefully protected from wind and deer, rabbits and mice. He will tend and nurture them as he has done so many others until they are strong enough to be planted on his property to strengthen the dna of the trees he has already planted.

His goal is to create a rich diversity of native plants, and within each species, a rich diversity in tree dna.

This requires research and travel, and occasionally a disdainful look when we suggest a nice lilac hedge.

Michael has been doing this for years. But he is reaching the age when he won't see these seedlings grow to mature oaks and maples, just as those who planted trees on our property never got to enjoy the row of white pine lining the drive -- or got to cut down those darn dead lombard poplars or Manitoba maples that grow twenty feet a year because they aren't in Manitoba!

Michael is living a quiet life of faith in Mother Earth as he scuffs up chestnuts and acorns with his feet, reaches down and carefully separates his prizes into pockets and bags. He has studied creation and lives obedient to the principles he has learned. He is not swayed by beautiful lilac blooms, even though they were brought to this country by pioneers. No, they weren't a part of the plan for this ecosystem. He is loyal to the plan.

It's a humble plan that he is obedient to and he has faith in his role in the plan.

This difficult little passage from Luke this morning is more understandable to me when I think of Michael as I hear the question the disciples ask.

"Can you give us more faith?"

What is this faith they seek, yearn for even? Faith means trust or confidence in someone or something. The disciples are asking for a closer bond with Jesus, to trust in him more. It's not about faith in a certain doctrine or teaching, it's about loyalty to this friend and teacher.

"Can you give us more faith?"

And in response, Jesus says:

If you had trust in me the size of a mustard seed, you could ...

This is disturbing, isn't it? If we had more faith we could perform miracles: cure cancer, eradicate poverty, find a parking space when we needed it.

Some brag of being able to perform miracles, and in the echo of their claims, we are ashamed that our faith can't do the same.

But is this what Jesus is promising?

This passage is tucked between a warning not to put stumbling blocks in the way of the faith of others and the rest of this reading about **slaves**. These are harsh messages Luke has piled up. Jesus is pushing the envelope: exaggerating for effect: even being sarcastic.

After all, it's rather ridiculous to throw mulberry trees into the ocean or move mountains. When Jesus' followers ask for faith, what do we want? Certainty? perhaps even superiority? Faith, then, becomes an accomplishment. Like a drug you take that takes away all pain or that makes life easy..

With enough faith, the televangelists tell us, we can conquer doubt, illness, and become rich in the process. Our troubles will be over if we just get Jesus to give us a big enough faith..

But that gets Jesus angry. Maybe the point is that faith doesn't come in sizes. It's a question like that other one Jesus dislikes, "Who gets to sit closest to you in heaven?"

And Jesus' response is -- faith is a gift. Don't examine it like you can exchange it for a bigger size. "You have it! It's what you do with it that counts!"

We know from the whole of Jesus' life and teachings, from his death and resurrection, that he isn't about casting mulberry trees into oceans.

Rather, we do know that Jesus is about bringing into reality here on earth God's plan.

And the second part of the reading is about what he expects from the disciples if they truly accept God's gift of faith and how it fits into God's plan.

It's difficult to see anything good about a reference to slaves, and some translations change this to servants. But Jesus seems to want to link his frustration with the disciples with the harshness of the concept of slavery.

He puts the disciples in the position of God: should God thank you for your faithfulness? Should God see how loyal you are and say, "You're wonderful!?" Should Jesus say, "Thanks for trusting us?" or rather, should we be focussing on obedience to God's plan? On gratitude for the gift of a relationship with this Jesus, and for the opportunity to participate in God's good work, God's plan?

Thank God for the Gift of Faith and be obedient to God's will: that's the message of this scripture.

But we hear these words on the day when we are invited, along with millions of others, to gather at God's table; to remember a generous God who feeds us physically and spiritually. How can we be anything but grateful?!

Someone once said that faith is not so much an idea or belief, it's more like a muscle. We have been given this muscle -- and we know what muscles are for -- to be used.

With the way things are in the world, it can be refreshing to practise a little humility before God who offers us the gift of faith, gratitude for the fortitude, the resilience faith gives us.

And that gratitude can take the form of setting our sights on the little bit of God's plan we can live out -- it's God's plan we are called to obey, to serve.

On this day, we come to the table remembering what God offered us through Jesus, wise teacher, prophet, encourager and chastiser, but also people all over the world who gather at table to do the same.

Unfortunately, our culture has acquired a taste for spectacular spirituality.

By the grace of God, mustard seed faith -- A humble faith like my friend Michael's that scuffs up seeds, plants and nurtures them without thought of reaping rewards -- a mustard seed faith suffices.

And our little faith is enough because God is as work beside us toiling with us through the day and inviting us to join with others at God's table.

Hear 'The Surprise at the Table'
A Poem For World Wide Communion 2019
by Andrew King

Underneath your nails: the dry brown earth,
and on your sweat-streaked brow.
The work in the fields was hard today,
the soil resisting the plow.

Your muscles ache as you approach the house,
thinking of food, a drink for your thirst.
In your weary hunger you long to dine,
but a slave does not eat first.

And the slave expects no thanks or praise
for doing only what must be done.
The master is served before the slave:
the slave's the unworthy one.

But what is this? . . . From the dining table
the aroma of fresh baked bread.
And is that not the master himself
bidding you take his seat at the head?

Can those be the master's hands, like yours,
still showing the stain of soil?
Was that the master next to you in the fields?
His sweat joining yours in toil?

Behold him pouring, now giving you the cup:
a drink of his finest wine.
Hear him say: I do this of my love for you.
For all hungry ones, and for all time.