SERMON FOR THANKSGIVING DAY
NOVEMBER 23, 2023

Happy Thanksgiving!

Today's Old Testament reading gives us rich imagery of Middle Eastern bounty: Grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, bread, milk & honey, and an endless source of water. I hope you noticed that Scripture even mentions resources like iron, copper, silver and gold.

You may have also noticed the juxtaposition: Scripture mentions the time the Israelites wandered in the desert - a time of scarcity, when they got water from flint rock and manna from heaven; a time when every day was a struggle because of the uncertainties.

Upon entering the Promised Land - the Israelites' final destination - Moses gets the Israelites all psyched up by depicting the great bounty and riches they will enjoy and then brings up the past: the wretched, 40-year ordeal of wandering in the desert. I bet some of the Israelites would have thought: "What a downer!"

But, if you think about it, there is nothing like materialism that can make one descend into a type of romanticism, and a false notion that all good things had been brought about by one's smarts, good luck, and ingenuity – and makes us forget God. So, this warning of Moses was absolutely pertinent and necessary.

Look what happened to the lepers: In our New Testament reading, we see ten lepers - people with skin disease, who were banished from their communities, wandering outside the bounds of civilization. Jesus sees them, has compassion on them, and heals them, which not only provided physical restoration but also social, financial, and religious… basically, a holistic restoration that made for a complete turnaround to these people who used to be outcasts. But when everything was finally made well, nine of them didn't return to Jesus. They were so preoccupied with getting the green light back into society by the very Temple priests, who applied the social sanction on them in the first place, that they completely forgot the One who made it all possible; the One who never shunned them to begin with.

It is easy to forget the Provider when all things are finally made well.

What is the difference between the nine who did not return and the one who did? Yes, there was an ethnic difference, but the real difference is internal: The Samaritan remembered what was and

what is now, and sought to see the face of the Healer and Giver of the great gift. The Samaritan praised God and thanked Jesus.

Remembering.
When we feel blessed.
When all things are going well.
When we have no worries for food, shelter, clothing, our health.
When, beyond our immediate needs, we have our wants fulfilled also.
We need to remember the One who provided all these things to us.

Remembering God prevents us from falling into the temptation of thinking it was our doing.
Remembering God's goodness helps us ward off the creeping sense of entitlement.
Remembering the times when we were not so privileged helps us stay humble.

But maybe I am preaching to the choir today. You all are here to worship God this day. You came to thank God first before joining your loved ones for hopefully a lovely Thanksgiving dinner. Maybe you all already have a proper attitude of gratitude!

Then, may I challenge you further? Can you do more than remember God and thank Him? Can you be good stewards of the blessings you have received and share your riches with the poor?

As is written in today's Epistle:

He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.

When we have experienced God's blessing, a concrete and tangible way of praising God is to make sure all of God's children benefit from it. The bountiful harvest and the natural resources God created is not meant just for the rich and the powerful. When systemic failures choke those who are trying to make ends meet, we can be Jesus' hands and feet and provide for those in dire need. This action of giving back is a faith expression only made possible with the belief that what you have received is indeed of God.

And lastly, I'd like to challenge you to thank God despite receiving what is commonly thought to be 'good things.' What I mean by that is this: It is my hope that you can share Moses' outlook

and see not just the bounty as a blessing but the testing in the desert as a blessing also, for he said, it was 'to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good.' If you could see the value of what are generally deemed to be bad experiences - because they help you learn what not to do, to be patient, to be more appreciative of the good people around us and what you have, because you learn to be resilient, etc. then, that your attitude of gratitude will have reached the supreme level of sainthood. You see, the Israelites were not poor while they were wandering, they had God and their hardships made them cling onto God for dear life. This is what makes 'the poor' blessed. As Barbara Taylor Brown put it, "When God is with us, nothing matters. (And when God is not with us, nothing matters)."

Let us thank God for His Providence, attribute praise to Him through good deeds towards His people, and bless Him for being with us in good times *and* bad. Amen.

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