

Harvest Thanksgiving B; October 11, 2009

Lections: Joel 2:21-27; Ps. 126; 1Tim. 2:1-7; Matthew 6:25-33

“One thing you know when you say it: all over the earth people are saying it with you; a child blurting it out as the seizures take her, a woman reciting it on a cot in the hospital. What if you take a cab through the Tenderloin; at a streetlight, a man in a wool cap, yarn unraveling across his face, knocks at the window; he says, PLEASE. The light changes and by the time the cab pulls away and you don’t go back, you hear what he’s saying and you know someone has just prayed to you the way you pray. Please: a word so short it could get lost in the air, as it floats up to God like the feather that it is, knocking and knocking, and finally falling back to earth as rain, as pellets of ice, soaking a black branch, collecting in drains, leaching into the ground, and you walk in that weather every day.” Ellery Akers, “The Word that is a Prayer,” The Sun, April, 2007.

I have never thought of the word, please, as a prayer, but I do now. I have often thought, especially at this time of year, that ‘thank you’ is a prayer. Please and thank you, the manners, the habits instilled in childhood. “It’s time to write your thank you notes.” “What’s the magic word? Please.” “Go back and say thank you to that man, that woman, that teacher, coach, EMT who saved your life, that soldier, legislator, doctor. A forum on the CBC radio this week of Thanksgiving offered many stories of neglected thank yous, all directed at the human community.

Here at church our thank yous are directed to God. In our liturgy we hear and say several times, thanks be to God; it is right to give our thanks and praise. As you may know, the word eucharistia means thanks. And our texts today show us how from ancient times the people have thanked God, words as a prayer, remembering God as the source of all goodness. In every culture the harvest season is a time of thanksgiving. In Joel, the images of plenty pour out in every verse. The psalm tells us that times of exile and captivity are over, echoing the reversal of scarcity in the Joel text. Restoration is surely from the hand of God. In 1 Timothy the Christians are reversing an order as well; rather than pray **to** whoever was in power, like the Roman governor, a prayer is said **for** them and for all people at all times. We continue that pattern today, praying for civil authorities in our prayers of the people. The gospel today is taken from the longer passage of the beatitudes, encouraging non anxious behavior, a reliance on God, and the development of patterns which will hold a community of faith in all seasons. How is it that we cultivate gratitude as a prayer? Does God need our gratitude?

We need to say thank you; we need gratitude as a faithful way of living. So often we take things for granted. “If you never give a thought to your good health, your children’s well-being, the lessons you have learned, the friends who bless your life...if you assume these things are normal and to be expected, you diminish your happiness,” says Jeff Jacoby, a columnist for the Boston Globe. One needs to be trained to count blessings and offer thanks. The Hebrew word for thanks is “hoda-ah” and it also means confession. In a sense gratitude is humility and modesty, confessing dependence on others and how they have benefitted you. One should admit that one’s life is better because of the efforts of others. We are impoverished without others; we are impoverished without God. I am

grateful for my morning cup of coffee; I am encouraged to give thanks for those who grew and harvested the beans, carried them to market, packaged them, drove them to stores, placed them on a shelf, all for my enjoyment. The same is true for any small or large pleasure; they come with many who are not thanked for their work.

What is a harvest but a bringing in of the crops out of the cold? It is a sheltering, a keeping of the growth at the end of the year. What harvest has God brought to you? What have you sheltered, kept, preserved? Maybe you have deepened your relationships this year or made new ones. Maybe you have been spared complications from an illness or you still have a job or a hope of one. Maybe you have the opportunity to share your life with someone. Maybe you can still make an apple pie. Maybe you can be gathered around a table feast and you say, “thank God.” Or perhaps you say, no, that is not true for me, things are tough and I am not happy. Your days are filled with complaints and dissatisfactions, large and small. I believe that gratitude is not seasonal; it is a faith filled way of living. It trusts in the promises of God and notices all blessings.

I have had the privilege of working with a small group of those preparing for confirmation. Their stories of hope and faith make me grateful for the faith that is in them, for their finding a home within this community. My daughter’s wedding this past Monday was full of opportunities to say thank you – to the chef, the florist, the staff who made our celebration so full of joy. I left some change on a counter last week as I ran numerous errands before the wedding; the shop-keeper was anxious for me to take the money. I found myself saying, “no, you keep it; it is good to begin a day with generosity.” When we acknowledge the good, and not take it as something we are due, we are praying a thank you. That is also what stewardship is about, a release of what has come our way; generosity emerges from gratitude, from paying attention.

The prayer book is full of graces used as table blessings; I know that we pray over our dinner meal together. When my children were young one of them asked me why we only said thanks at dinner time; weren’t we thankful for the other meals? Indeed. I found a site that included 56 table graces (in case someone was asked to say prayers at Thanksgiving dinner?). As I read through the graces, my heart was full of gratitude. I remembered the graces at camp, at various stages of family life, some sung, some so beautiful. I wonder if we are teaching the children here to be grateful, to pray their thanks. Here are a couple of new prayers:

“Lord, some people have food and no friends. Some have friends and no food. We thank you that this night we are blessed with both.”

“O God, to those who hunger, give bread. To those who have bread, give a hunger for justice.”

And this one is my favorite; even though I bear an Italian name, I am not Italian. But my spirit leaps at this one. “Lifting one’s arms to heaven and clapping wildly, ‘bravo!!! Multi grazie!!!’”

One thing you know when you say it: all over the earth, people are saying it with you: thank you. There are a thousand ways to pray it. Amen+

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