

Sunday Sermon

Thanksgiving Deuteronomy 26:1-11

March 30, 2008 Prepared by Rev Bill Whiston, Kingston Presbytery
Delivered at Friendship United Church by Rick Moynes

“Lord, I pray, put me in the centre of your will. Let me be a part of whatever you are doing this day in this place. Touch us and inspire each one of us, O God, with the gentleness of your Holy Spirit. Present yourself to us. Touch us, Open our ears as you lead us to true understanding. Amen

What amazing passages of scripture we have heard this morning? The Hebrew scripture describes an ancient festival of thanksgiving for the people of Israel. The first fruit was considered sacred and MUST BE offered to God before any human use was appropriate.

This, of course, acknowledges that God is the source of all things and that we need to use what God gives in a way that honours our Creator. There was a responsibility placed on the community to remember, then to share and only then to give a party and enjoy what God had provided.

Notice, that there was a responsibility to set aside a tithe of one tenth of all that was grown for sacred purposes, and for the care of the marginalized...widows, orphans and aliens. The scripture gives the ritual to be followed. After bringing the first fruits, the people are to recount the story of where they have come from, and how God has been there for them, and why it is appropriate to give thanks.

And so today our scriptures invite us into a conversation about a different way of being...a way of living with an attitude of gratitude that comes from a deep connection with the Source of all life.

Many of us live our lives centered more in anxiety and worry...caught up in a whirlwind of doing. Nursing old wounds, dwelling on what might have been, indulging ourselves in comparison with what others have, feeling bad if we do not buy into the materialism of our age, conducting endless mental calculations about conversations, gnawing on old, dry

bones of the past, or anticipating the worst for the future. In short, Living in FEAR.

People of God, living in the past or the future can rob us of the present moment, with all its harmony, and joy, and awareness of the abundance of life. It keeps us from caring for our soul, attending to the spiritual dimension of our lives, attending to our attitude of gratitude.

Actually, they are usually rooted in scarcity thinking. Scarcity thinkers believe that there is never enough to go around...that we need to hang on to all that we have for fear of losing it.

When we live like that, we come to the place that says at the centre of life is danger, poverty, anxiety, scarcity ...and what do we do? We tighten up, we turn inward, we operate out of fear and worry about the future. If our life experience has dealt us blows that seem to validate this world-view, it is even harder to break out of this negative slippery slope.

Yet that is precisely what our scriptures today invite us to do. They call us to a radical shift in our stance toward the world. They call us to live our life marching to the beat of a different drummer. We are called to march in tune with another way of experiencing life...to living out of gratitude and thankfulness, JOY and ABUNDANCE.

The Deuteronomy passage invites the people to remember where they have come from and to give thanks to the God who journeys with them ...God, the Creator of all of life. We hear described a scene of thanksgiving and giving to God and to the poor a tithe that was 10% at this period of the life of the Hebrew people. This offering was not to be a required tax. It was a gift of thanksgiving and an acknowledgement of the Creator of the harvest, and the need we have to share with those who have less.

In his book *“My Heart Soars,”* Chief Dan George born on the Burrard reserve in

North Vancouver in 1899 says: *“Of all the teachings we receive this one is the most important: Nothing belongs to you. Of what there is. Of what you take, you must share.”*

When we focus only on the fear, the powerlessness, the anxiety...these things can become all consuming. They can drown us...they can shut out everything that is good, and beautiful, and hopeful, and possible. The trees can be shouting out their beauty for us to see, to notice, to celebrate, but we can walk by them, as if they weren't there.

When our focus is off centre, we tend to protect ourselves from the pain of the world...we turn it off and pretend it doesn't exist. On the other hand, when we are able to ground ourselves and orient our souls so that we are living out of the experience of God...connected to the Spirit at the heart of life...then, we find we can live more out of God's grace, out of faith in God's future for each one of us and for the world that God loves. And strangely enough we are also able to enter more deeply into the painful places of other people's lives without drowning ourselves.

Well, feeling like that is a constant challenge, but also a constant calling. We need a faith community to keep us grounded in this way of living. In community we can renew our hope as we struggle with God's word for us today...as we remember again the vision God has for creation.

We can be brought back to that sacred place where we recall that each one of us bears God's image.

We can share the stories of our journeys. In community we can know and be known, beyond the masks we put on for the world...and herein, we can be healed.

In community we can be challenged and we can challenge ...we can be strengthened and we can find strength.

I don't believe that troubles are sent to try us, but they do reveal our basic attitude of grace.

I think the best way to close today is by reading Ernest Campbell's² prayer of thanksgiving...a somewhat odd prayer, but he writes:

O God, there are blessings that come to us so clearly marked that even in our most disgruntled mood they compel our thanks.

But gathered now, before Thee we would reflect on mercies that have come to us disguised, or reached us in roundabout ways.

We think of an unwelcome illness that shifted the centre of our trust from self to Thee.

...of new people who entered our life without our willing or wanting, and in time expanded our horizons and made us better for their friendship.

...of some prize that toppled from our grasp as we strained to reach it, causing us to change course and in the changing to discover life itself.

...We remember long nights of heavy-hanging doubt that issued in a wiser, sturdier faith.

Explosive arguments that aired differences, routed sham, located issues, and made authentic meeting possible;

...challenges to our power that deflated the ego and left us with a humbler estimate of self.

For these and other back door mercies, we give Thee thanks, dear God.

And at Easter 2008, may it be so for us.