

National Day of Thanksgiving
November 26, 2014
Deuteronomy 8:7-18

In my house, we've been using these foam placemats on the kitchen table over the last couple of weeks. Actually, we have the ladies from Creative Fellowship to thank for these. When I brought in our items for the Craft Fair, they said to me: "Why don't you take these [foam placemats] home? This was an idea that didn't really catch on as something for the Craft Fair." So, I did take them home and my family has been using them when we have dinner in the evening. All you need is a Sharpie pen and you're set! Everybody has their own placemat and each person gets to write or draw something on their placemat that they're thankful for. It's been a good exercise to reflect on God's gifts in our lives in these days leading up to Thanksgiving. Here are some things that found their way onto our family's placemats: sleep, family, pets, leaf blowers, Fridays, sweaters, Christmas blend coffee, friends, umbrellas, a warm fire in the fireplace, music. It goes without saying that there are many, many more blessings and gifts from God's hand in our lives. This annual day of Thanksgiving provides us with the opportunity to slow down, reflect, and give thanks for God's blessings. It's easy to focus on the gifts and blessings, but we're called to see beyond the gifts themselves to the Giver of those gifts: God our Maker and Redeemer, who loves us. And so as we come together this evening in the Lord's house, what is it that you are thankful for?

The first reading from the Old Testament comes from the book of Deuteronomy, one of the five books of Moses, the Torah. The name of this book comes from two Greek words meaning "second law." And that is exactly what the theme of Deuteronomy is: an extended review session of what God had already taught his chosen and covenant people through his servant, Moses. God's people stood poised and ready to enter into the Promised Land, but before they do, they need to hear once again the Lord's teaching. Moses reminds the people of God's unfailing mercy and faithfulness, of how He called them out of slavery in Egypt and rescued them with his mighty hand and outstretched arm. And in response to all that God has done for them, Moses calls upon the people to follow the Lord. In that obedience to the Lord, they will find blessing. That is the context of what is behind this first Scripture reading this evening.

Has not the Lord done the same thing for us? Has He not also shown to us unfailing mercy and faithfulness? Has He not rescued us from slavery to sin, death and the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with the holy and precious blood of his own Son, Jesus (1 Peter 1:18-19)? To be sure, we are not Israel of old, but we are God's children today through faith. Even as the Lord God brought his children of old into a good land, so He has brought us to this good land. And now, what is our response? What will we do? The Word of the Lord tells us: "**And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land he has given you**" (Deuteronomy 8:10). Long before the Pilgrims celebrated what we call the first Thanksgiving in 1621, Moses called upon the people to remember and give thanks to the Lord.

And then there is a very sobering reminder that the Lord gives to his people then and now: "**Take care lest you forget the Lord your God... when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God...**" (Deuteronomy 8:11-14a). How quick we are to question or even blame God when life is difficult and things do not go our way! And how quick we are to congratulate and praise ourselves when life is good and things do go our way! "**Beware let you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.' You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth...**" (Deuteronomy 8:17-18a). Together with turkey and all the trimmings that we'll feast on at Thanksgiving, we also ought to eat a healthy slice of humble pie, realizing that is the Lord alone who showers such good things upon us.

Recently, I received a letter from a former member who wrote the following: “Do you remember several years ago when a thank you note (blank with envelope) was in each bulletin [for the Thanksgiving service]? We wondered why. You worked it into your sermon about appreciating people and things they do for us and how we should not forget to thank them. So we go home and write a note to that special person. I thought that was the greatest idea and have never forgotten it – I think I wrote 4 or 5 that day! Thanks for the reminder! I hope you do it again...” And so I do encourage you to do this very thing. As part of your Thanksgiving celebration, take time to write out a note – yes, write it out long hand, and not just in an email or text – to someone you’d like to thank. That note of thanks will have a much bigger impact than you think. And how do we express our thanks to the Lord? Certainly our words and thoughts and prayers convey our thanks and gratitude to the Lord, whose mercies are new to us every day. But I believe the Lord would also have us express our thanks and gratitude in works of love that bless other people, especially those in need. We heard that especially in Jesus’ words from the Gospel lesson last Sunday (Matthew 25:31-46). And that is what the Koinonia Thanksgiving baskets, as well as these Thanksgiving bags, are all about: doing good in Jesus’ Name. There’s a very appropriate Latin phrase here that sums this up: *Dum tempus habemus operemur bonum*, “While we have time, let us do good.”

And so on this Thanksgiving Eve in the year of Our Lord 2014, as we prepare to gather with loved ones and friends around tables groaning with wonderful food, let us take to heart the example of that one leper who was cleansed and who alone returned to give thanks to Jesus. And in our giving of thanks, *dum tempus habemus operemur bonum*: while we have time, let us do good. And God will be glorified. Amen.