

Thanksgiving

Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Philippians 4:4-9

Center Church, Hartford

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When I was a child, I was taught that there were two magic words: Please and Thank You (well, that's actually three but you know what I mean). When I thought about magic, I thought about it as saying a spell that would change someone or something else, like turning a frog into a prince. Therefore, saying "Please" or "Thank you" would either make the other person get me what I wanted or make the other person feel good so they would get me what I wanted next time!

As I grew, I began to understand that the magic of "Thank you" had as much to do with me as with the person to whom I said it! To say, "Thank you," you have to pay attention to what is happening around you, to you, and for you. You have to notice that somehow, even when things are challenging or painful, you are being blessed by someone or something. Paul's letter to the Philippian church says that when you come to God with thanksgiving, the peace of God, which is beyond anything we can imagine, will enfold our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.

Being thankful changes **us**. It is all too easy, given advertising in every media possible, to be enfolded by thoughts and dreams of what we don't have or what we want, especially at this time of year, especially if you know that you are unlikely to be able to have what you want or need because of finances or health problems or broken relationships or whatever. Simply saying "thank you" does not make those problems go away. It is not meant to be a trite thing that privileged people say to those who lack privilege so they will be happy with their lot. That's not what I'm talking about.

I'm talking about paying attention to blessings around you that you may be taking for granted or may have simply missed their impact on your life. One of my favorite poems comes from Elizabeth Barrett Browning. She remembers how, when Moses was called by God to go to Egypt to free the enslaved Hebrews, he saw a bush burning in the wilderness and heard a voice telling him to take off his shoes because what looked like dirt and rocks to him was actually holy ground. Browning wrote this:

*Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God.
But only those who see take off their shoes;
The rest sit around and pluck blackberries.*

To be thankful is to take off our shoes, metaphorically or really, when we realize a gift has been given to us in some way. Especially when we realize that the presence of God surrounds us. To be thankful is to **see** deeply, even for just one moment, as Browning says, to notice and then to acknowledge that something has happened that has changed you for good. **It doesn't make the bad go away, but it strengthens us to persevere.**

The American celebration of the Thanksgiving holiday is complicated. Our Native American kin do not remember this story warmly because of the massacres and land theft that followed. But the practice of regular, ritual thanksgiving for Christians and Jews goes much farther back, as the Deuteronomy reading reminds us. The bringing of first fruits was to be a ritual way of saying "thank you" to God, after so much struggle and pain and loss, that God had stood beside them and led them on. This instruction was given while the people were still wandering in the wilderness, without a land like the Kurds or Palestinians today. They couldn't see the Promised Land, but trusted in the one who promised them home. They anticipated gratitude and it strengthened them for the journey.

This morning, I invite you into a ritual practice of thanksgiving. Two gratitude actions. First, on one of the index cards in the pews write words of thank you to God for however God has moved in your life this past year or for the earth around you. Hold on to them and speak them aloud or silently during our prayers then, if you wish, put them in the offering plate as a gift to God.

In addition, I invite you to make a gift to someone else that will bring both you and them a sense of the peace of which Paul's letter spoke. The ushers are passing out cards. Please take one and think of someone who has touched your life for good and write them a short note right now saying thank you. Then give it to them if they are here or take it home and mail it. If you can't afford a stamp, bring it to the Church House or give it to me if it is addressed today and we will mail it for you. It doesn't need to be long or fancy; just letting people know you paid attention and noticed how they blessed your life. Go ahead, write a thank you to God and then to someone in your life.

I am thankful to you, Center Church, for how you have enriched my life. I hope all of you will continue to work the magic of "thank you" in your life and the lives around you, and I wish you a blessed Thanksgiving.