November 24, 2013 Norwalk

Thanksgiving Sunday

**Pastoral Prayer**

God of harvest and home, of family and friends, of inner peace and global longing, we give you thanks for all the blessings we know. Now, we won’t lie to you; we’re not always satisfied. There are all kinds of trinkets and toys we would love to see finding their way into our possession; any number of parking spaces we would prefer to pull into right up close to the front entrance of the various places we visit. We get weary of change and begin to wish that things could just stay the same as always -- until we remember that everything we treasure was new to us at some time or another, and we’d hate to miss out on the next new treasures you have in store for us just beyond our sight.

So we give thanks for ALL your blessings -- even those we haven’t yet discerned or learned to appreciate.

We give you special thanks this day for the intersection our lives and ministry have had with Diana through these years -- as friend, as co-worker, confidant, helper and pastor and fellow-disciple. We ask your blessing on her life and work going forward, trusting that you will bless us with enduring memories and a continuing abundance of graces.

Bless those who are traveling this week with uneventful safety; those who are welcoming this week with an expansive hospitality; and those who are wanting this week -- or recovering from devastations beyond their control -- with the comforting riches of your mercy,

...for we pray in the name of Jesus who taught us to pray: Our father…

**Deuteronomy 26:1-11**

When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, “Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us.” When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, you shall make this response before the Lord your God: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.” You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.

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***Remember When…***

I finally got the garlic planted this week -- none too soon as the plummeting temperatures bore witness -- but the cloves are in the ground, with a little extra nourishment thrown in, and covered with straw. Perhaps you have done it as well: breaking apart a garlic head, separating it into the individual cloves which are then planted and, presumably and with a little luck, sometime next summer each of those single cloves becomes a head of its own. The multiplication is even more dramatic with those beloved tomato seeds -- a tiny, unappealing little speck that becomes a bush bearing several -- maybe even dozens of -- tomatoes of its own, each packed with a universe of equally potent seeds. It is the horticultural norm, after all -- planting seeds that bear multiplied fruit.

There are those televangelists who promote a similar kind of practice in the area of giving that they like to call “seed offerings.” Perhaps you have been unfortunate enough to hear them on TV -- advising listeners to make a sacrificial offering, even or especially out of their poverty, as though planting a seed; one that will grow and return to the giver multi-fold. One gives, they assert, in order to get. “Stepping out on faith,” according to their spiritual algebra. It is sort of the financial equivalent of breaking a few eggs to make an omelet.

It makes sense, of course, in agriculture -- and business, for that matter, and various other undertakings in which small, initial investments mature into meaningful and hopefully plentiful returns. But as the scripture reading this morning bears witness, that’s all sort of backwards when it comes to our offerings. With the blessings of God, we give as thanksgiving for what we have already gotten, not as bait for what we would like to receive. It is an act of memory, not desire. We remember what has been harvested, connect the dots that led there in a way that spells “God,” and offer our gifts of gratitude in a way that shakes loose the recollection of other, older experiences of blessing.

Our national leaders have historically recognized that order of things. George Washington in 1789 designated the first national Thanksgiving Day by proclaiming in part:

*“I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th day of November next to be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be. That we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks, for his kind care and protection … and in general for all the great and various favors which he hath been pleased to confer upon us.”*

Less than a 100 years later, President Abraham Lincoln doubled down on the idea in the midst of what some might consider to have been the dubious context for thanksgiving, busy as we were killing each other in the Civil War, by proclaiming a similar national Thanksgiving Day, to be celebrated on the final Thursday in November 1863. Hear a little longer portion of Lincoln’s proclamation:

*“The year that is drawing towards its close, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature, that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever watchful providence of Almighty God. In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity ... peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere except in the theatre of military conflict; while that theatre has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union. Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defence, have not arrested the plough, the shuttle, or the ship; the axe had enlarged the borders of our settlements, and the mines, as well of iron and coal as of the precious metals, have yielded even more abundantly than heretofore. Population has steadily increased, notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege and the battle-field; and the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years, with large increase of freedom.*

*No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy.*

*It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and voice by the whole American people.”*

In other words, according to Lincoln, in the midst of all kinds of really terrible goings on, we have been showered with blessings; and we ought to pause a moment to acknowledge the wonder of it, comprehend the immensity of it, and name our gratitude for it. I think that is pretty amazing discernment -- and a pretty instructive example, since at any given time it wouldn’t be too much trouble to make a pretty colorful list of all the lousy things going on around US. What else, Lincoln makes me wonder, might be going on simultaneously that we ought to be noticing and giving THANKS for?

That’s the creative discipline of faithful discernment at the core of this holiday season: thinking about the blessings that have accumulated around us, we pause and give thanks. But the fact is that this idea is older than Lincoln or Washington or the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock. As we read earlier from the book of Deuteronomy, Moses had set it up that way with the Israelites thousands of years before. Having exodused Egypt after 400 years of slavery, Moses and the people were approaching the land that had been promised them. They weren’t there yet -- were still camped out on the “wilderness” side rather than the “milk and honey” side of the river. But the wilderness, Moses knew, was not to be their destiny. Like a church that foresightfully sets up a policy that anticipates being the recipient, sometime in the future, of wills and bequests, Moses prescribes in advance a blessing response policy. The exact opposite of, “give now so that you will receive later,” the people are simply told to expect prosperity. “When it comes,” Moses counsels them, “here is what you do: take a portion of it and give it back as a thank offering. And as the priest is taking it from your hands, make conscious note of the fact that this abundance is not isolated, and did not occur in a vacuum. Recall, in the giving, all the larger blessings you have previously received on whose shoulders these current ones stand.”

Remember when...

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor…”

Remember, in other words, that long history of God’s care and blessing that stretches way back before you were even born, and that will extend through you and well beyond your days.

\* Remember when this fruitful garden was just a patch of bare land.

\* Remember when you didn’t think you were going to make it through that miserable grief or that total confusion or that broken disappointment with your selfhood still intact -- and you are standing here today as living, breathing, smiling evidence that with the help of God you did.

\* Remember when… As if to acknowledge that, though I may or may not have been aware of it, God has been working in my life for a long, long time.

All of which is to say that, in the blessing business, God always makes the first move. And that if I practice at it, I might just BECOME more aware of that movement.

And so remember, as well, when you step out tomorrow or the next year or the next decade in ambiguity or hesitation or timidity toward some great endeavor, all the blessing and tending of God that paved the way for it in the past.

Remember when…

The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm…and brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. How could we help but...bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given us.”

This is the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.

Happy Thanksgiving, indeed.