

“The Need to Give Thanks”
Psalm 100
Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost
November 18, 2007

Okay, you can’t talk turkey without the Pilgrims. So let me remind you that on November 11, 1620, after a 65-day voyage across the Atlantic, a group of Separatist Puritans set foot on Plymouth Rock, in what is now Massachusetts. History has affectionately referred to that group of travelers as “The Pilgrims.” As almost every American schoolboy or schoolgirl knows, that first winter in the new world was hard. At least half of those who had disembarked from the Mayflower died. That spring they met a Wampanoag Indian named Squanto, who had learned English from the many fishermen who had plied the waters just offshore. He taught them how to raise corn by planting the seed in mounds, along with a small fish that would act as fertilizer as it decayed. He helped them plant squash, showed them where to find fruit and berries, and how to hunt the game that populated the land. In the fall of 1621, after a bountiful harvest, the Pilgrims invited Squanto, his chief Massasoit, and 90 Wampanoag braves to a feast. They ate, played games, and celebrated the harvest. And at some point during that feast, William Bradford more than likely read the following words:

Shout joyfully to praise the Lord, all you who dwell upon the earth.

Worship the Lord with a happy heart; before him sing songs of joy.

Know that the Lord alone is God, for he has made us;

we are his—the people who belong to him, the flock he pastures in his land.

Enter his portals giving thanks, come praising him into his courts.

Make known to him your thankfulness, praising him with one accord.

For God the Lord is good indeed, his love endures eternally;

his faithfulness continues on throughout all ages to the end.

Those words of the 100th Psalm are taken from the Geneva Bible, the most popular Bible among Protestants of the 16th and 17th centuries, and the Bible that the Pilgrims brought with them to America. The King James Version, published only 10 years earlier, had not yet become widely accepted. But as you know, whichever

translation one uses, the words of that particular psalm are some of the most familiar in all of scripture. As a matter of fact, one has written that, “were the statistics known, Psalm 100 would probably prove to be the song most often chanted within the history that runs from the Israelite temple on Mount Zion to the synagogues and churches spread across the earth.”¹ In most translations, you will find the words “A Psalm of Thanksgiving” right under the number 100 and right before these familiar verses begin. It is a teaching psalm, and those that it is teaching live in “all the earth.” Everyone on the planet is called to “make a joyful noise” to the one who is over the planet. God, Israel’s God, is the one God and creator of everything. And humanity’s true identity is wrapped up in this God, for “it is he who made us.” Above all else, that is what this psalm wants us to “know.”

Do you know that “the Lord is God?” Do you understand how our identity as humans begins and ends in God? And on this Sunday before Thanksgiving, do you realize how our God-given identity calls us to live with joy, gladness, praise, and most importantly, gratitude? I read a blog last week by Dan Clendenin² who reminds us that giving thanks in today’s world, when war, starvation, racism, HIV-AIDS, climatic change, and senseless killing in our own backyard is raging all about us, is very counter-cultural. It just doesn’t make sense to live joyfully in such an unjoyful world *unless* one understands his or her place in it. And according to Clendenin, that place is with God. Permit me to quote what he has to say:

“The source of our confident joy and joyful confidence originates in the fundamental acknowledgement that “the Lord, he is God. It is He who hath made us and not we ourselves; we are His people, and the sheep of His pasture.” Turning from divine praise to human dignity, the Psalmist celebrates the good news that we are neither alone nor autonomous. He confesses that God fashioned every single person, and that therefore every human being enjoys an inherent worth that can never be earned or even lost, and that therefore we enjoy His bountiful care.”

¹ J. Clinton McCann, Jr., “The Book of Psalms,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume 4*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, p. 1079

² Dan Clendenin, www.journeywithjesus.net

But not everybody views the world from that perspective. I learned a new term this week. It is “speciesism.” Ever heard of it? Upon doing some research, I found that it is basically the idea that simply being human is a good enough reason for humans to have greater rights than animals. Technically speaking, and according to the BBC, speciesism is “a prejudice or bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species against those members of other species.” Now it may surprise you to learn that, with the exception of the PETA folks, most of us are “speciesists.” Say a child and a dog are trapped in a fire. Only one of them can be saved. Which one will you rescue? Even if you love your pet, if you didn’t have to think about that dilemma for more than a millisecond, then you practice speciesism. And there are those who say it is wrong to do so. There are those who say that there is no moral difference between that child and that dog, and that treating the dog differently than the child is an ethically reprehensible act.

Now this all came into the discussion during the interpretation of the 100th Psalm, especially that 3rd verse: “It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.” Clendenin writes of those who object to the psalm’s homocentric leanings. He quotes Bertrand Russell who wrote, “Since Copernicus, it has been evident that Man has not the cosmic importance which he formerly arrogated to himself. No man who has failed to assimilate this fact has a right to call his philosophy scientific.” He also refers to Richard Dawkins, the noted atheist whose recent book The God Delusion is a national bestseller. Dawkins believes that anyone who claims that the human species has any special moral consideration as compared to other species is a misguided religious zealot whose ancient superstition has “no proper basis in evolutionary biology.” In other words, even though humanity has progressed to an amazing degree as compared with other species, men and women are no better or worse than any other creature that roams the planet. With Russell and others, he believes that science proves that humanity enjoys no special place within the cosmos.

Well, fellow zealots, I have problems with the Dawkins’ delusion. While my belief system tells me that humanity does have special moral consideration, that God

gave us dominion over this world, that same system does not give humanity the right do what they please with the rest of creation. As one has written about our beliefs, “The dominion here mandated...is that of a shepherd.”³ Biblical faith calls the man and the woman to be “keepers of the garden,” or stewards of creation. But that’s a whole other sermon. While I am at it, however, please also know that even though I am not at all anti-science, I agree with those who say that a purely scientific worldview has been disastrous for humanity. The Holocaust alone makes the old promise of “endless progress through science” null and void. But again, that’s for another time and place. What is important right now is for us to see how all of this relates to the 100th Psalm and to what will happen this coming Thursday. And I want to try to do so by sharing a story, one that may sound somewhat familiar.

My family and I had taken a vacation trip to Wyoming. We stayed a night in the town Jackson, the same night all those folks heading for Sturgis were there, and then headed to Yellowstone. Now if you have ever taken the highway north out of Jackson, then you know that just past the city limits the road hugs a huge granite escarpment as it climbs a long hill. As you look out of the driver’s side window, all you see is this massive rock face. Then as you near the crest of that hill, the escarpment melts away and suddenly the majestic Grand Tetons are in full view. It is, of course, the million-dollar, picture postcard view. It is absolutely breathtaking. If you happen to drive by as the sun begins to rise, then the deep hues of blue, purple, and pink gloriously paint the mountains. Often a herd of elk will be grazing in one of the lush, green meadows that lead up to those magnificent hills. As you take it all in, your heart wells up with such emotion that, if you are like me, it probably poured out of you in the words “Thank you, God!” Upon seeing such beauty and wonder, what else can you do? You need to thank someone. Gratitude is the only reasonable response for a sight like that—at least for misguided religious zealots like you and me.

No, let me change that. I believe that it is the only reasonable response for anyone. Humanity has a need to give thanks. Most ethicists believe that gratitude is an

³ Walter Brueggeman, Genesis, John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1982, p. 32

integral part of the moral life. Someone wrote, “We all live our lives as debtors, receiving more than we earn or deserve, much more than we contribute to society or life. We need not resort to cheap religious rhetoric to find something in our lives that elicits some measure of [thanks].”⁴ Even most atheists, I believe, would agree with that statement; would say that that being thankful is an important part of life—they would just thank those who made possible whatever it is for which they need to be thankful, rather than some God they do not believe exists. And that may work for them. But I’ve often wondered, when they encounter such beauty as I found in the Tetons, when they behold the delicately formed fingers of their newborn child, when their heart begins to pound at the everyday sight of the love of their life, then whom do they thank? I think I lean toward what the great English poet Christina Rossetti once wrote: “...*were there no God, we would be in this glorious world with grateful hearts with no one to thank.*” Psalm 100 points all of those who believe to the object of their thanksgiving. This psalm leads those who believe down the path that every person of gratitude should travel. For this psalm not only reminds us of who we are, but of whose we are as well. “*He made us and we belong to him, we are his people, the flock that he pastures.*”

But again, that is so difficult for us to believe in a world that teaches us that we are all self-made men and women. I remember doing a funeral a few years ago for a man who bought into that idea big time. He had been a quite successful businessman and community leader who had left a considerable legacy in his particular part of the state. And he had been very proud of it. Long before he died, he had picked out the music for his memorial service. So right before I stood up to preach, a singer took the podium and sang the Elvis rendition of “My Way,” complete with a curled lip and a shaking leg. Upon the conclusion of that song, there was thunderous applause from the congregation—with the exception, of course, from those sitting around my very best friend. Every one of them was biting his or her lip. They knew, you see. In addition to being totally appalled and trying very hard not to laugh, they understood the dynamics of the situation. As residents of that same community, they realized how the road had been paved for him by so many others, how he had been the beneficiary of the vision and

⁴ William Willimon, The Service of God, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1983, p. 196

foresight of men and women far more humble than him, how—even though he did push his particular views and get much accomplished—he had by no means been alone in the process. As I walked to the pulpit, I wondered if the majority of those there even understood what they were doing. Biblical faith has always proclaimed that “my way” is not God’s way. Our life is not lived in isolation. We have benefited from the gifts of others as well as the Other. Genuine life is always found in gratitude for everything that has been given to us, for *“He made us, and we belong to him; we are his people, the sheep he tends.”*

People need to give thanks. Doing so is one of the things that make us human. Giving thanks helps us to remember that we are not autonomous, that we are a part of something so much bigger than ourselves, something that we did not have a hand in creating, and something to which our response cannot be confined simply to the fourth Thursday in November. That is why the apostle Paul urged the Christians at Thessalonica, “In all circumstances give thanks.” He did not urge them to do so because everything in life is good. He did not do so himself because he held some Pollyanna view of existence. He did so because at the very foundation of his life he knew both who he was and whose he was, that *“we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.”* And because that is so, he realized that there is nothing—whether it be death, or life, or angels, or principalities, or things present, or things to come, or height, or depth, or anything else in all creation—that could keep our great Shepherd from us. And in this very frightening world, that is the best we are going to get.

As I said before, there are many different translations of Psalm 100. However the words are rendered, each proclaims the very good news of whom we are and whose we are. Hear now another translation of this psalm. It is taken from the translation known as the TANAKH, the translation used in synagogues all across our land. Listen to it with ears of faith and with hearts of gratitude:

*“Raise a shout for the Lord, all the earth;
worship the Lord in gladness;*

come into His presence with shouts of joy.

Acknowledge that the Lord is God;

He made us and we are His;

His people, the flock he tends.

Enter His gates with praise,

His courts with acclamation.

Praise him! Bless His name!

For the Lord is good;

His steadfast love is eternal;

His faithfulness for all generations.

And all of God's people said, "Amen!"