

Reflection for Sunday, October 10, 2021

Thanks Living

God is creative and self-giving, generously moving in all the near and distant corners of the universe. Nothing exists that does not find its source in God. Our first response to God's providence is gratitude. We sing thanksgiving.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are...

...for God all things are possible.

Let us pray:

Listening God, hear your church today as we bring our joys and our concerns, our thanksgivings and our demands. Fill us with the assurance that you truly hear our words and thoughts, our songs and our tears. In the name of the One who always shows us the way, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

One of the ministers who had a huge impact on my ministry (and life!) was the Rev. Dr. Clifford Elliott. When I began my theological studies at Emmanuel College in Toronto, Rev. Elliott was the minister at Metropolitan United—later he would be called to Bloor Street United—and was adjunct professor at Emmanuel College. I remember the class when Cliff reflected on the meaning of Thanksgiving and suggested that Thanksgiving is fraught with paradoxes. Trying to understand them goes a long way toward understanding the place of God in our lives. He shared this humorous reminiscence: *"In the Saskatchewan village where I grew up there was no running water. Having a bath, especially in winter, was a major operation. In the corner of the kitchen sat a barrel and it was my job to keep it filled with snow. Once the snow had*

melted, the water had to be strained of bits of straw and floating dirt and placed in large containers on the wood stove. Finally, we poured the water into a galvanized wash tub on the floor and, gingerly, stepped in. Crouching awkwardly in the tub, never finding a place to put my knees, I tried to scrub myself clean. There was never any temptation to linger in the bath, although stepping onto the icy floor was a deterrent against getting out. Once dry and dressed, I emerged from the kitchen and admitted the next candidate. Now that I live in a house with a full-size bath tub, complete with running hot water, I rarely have a bath without thinking back on those more primitive years. I enjoy the act of giving thanks almost as much as the bath itself, for I realize that if I had never been deprived of the luxury of the modern bath, I could never have sung such exuberant songs of heartfelt thanksgiving.”

Of course, there is more to celebrating Thanksgiving than simply being grateful for such little things as a hot bath. But that simple gratitude led Dr. Elliot to ask some very important questions: Why can we not appreciate something until or unless we have been deprived of it? Why is it so hard to appreciate health until we have experienced serious illness? Why is suffering frequently a necessary prelude to joy?

Our psalm for this Thanksgiving Sunday expresses this paradox: *“May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves”* (Psalm 126:6). How can a person sow tears and reap joy? And yet we sense that there are times when tears and joy do go together, that emotions have to reach a certain depth before they are real.

As he traveled, Jesus was confronted by a variety of people wanting to see him. One of them was the wealthy man we read about in this Sunday’s Gospel passage. Unlike the children (10:13-16) and blind Bartimaeus (10:46-52), this man, literally the *“one”*, was not prevented

from approaching Jesus. We know only that this man ran toward Jesus and, kneeling before him, perhaps gasping, asked, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (10:17). His hurried approach could communicate an earnest desire for knowledge and, more importantly, an anxiety about eternal life.

He was probably the most promising candidate to join the band of disciples that had ever come along. He was rich. He was young. He took initiative. What’s more, he had very impressive religious credentials. He unabashedly made the claim that he had kept the commandments from his youth. We cut to the end of the story and see him go away shocked and grieving. Jesus’ requirement for the rich young man was simply that he give away all his wealth to the poor and come be a disciple. That is, a follower, a learner who lives with Jesus in the freedom of perfect obedience to the God he called ‘Abba’.

The man was unable to step into that freedom because he had great possessions. The one thing he lacked happened to be the one thing he could not do. His attachment to his goods was greater than his hunger for God. He is a living embodiment of the values which we live by. Seemingly, he cannot be saved (i.e., delivered, made whole) because his heart is owned by goods.

This episode opens for us a paradox. The wholeness the rich young man longs for is already available as God’s free, gracious gift. Yet, he wants to earn it. He wants to do something to inherit it, to possess it alongside all his other things. The one thing he could do, become a follower of Jesus, he is unwilling to perform. He refuses the gift because the price is too high.

We struggle with the paradox of a gracious God whose gift of life lays such great claims on those who receive it. Paradoxically, we ask: *What must we do to inherit eternal life?* It is clear that Jesus was asking more of him than just to give up his money. Jesus was inviting him to give up

what held him back from loving God completely. It was not wealth per se that was the young man's problem; it was his attachment to his possessions. He could not imagine a life without his possessions. He could not also imagine his worth without them. Jesus offered him a life without the security of things and with the assurance of what the young man said he wanted—eternal life.

If, as Christians, we claim that our aim is to be found worthy to live eternally with God, are we able to see Jesus' challenge differently. If not on riches, on what other objects might we be centering our trust? What physical or nonphysical "things of the world" stop us from giving God our whole heart and make it hard for us to follow Jesus? What request from God would leave us shocked and grieving? Why? Are we showing the world what it means to trust God and love one another as brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, and children?

Thanksgiving carries something of the image of spontaneity about it. It demands a disciplined moment of restraint, a stepping back from our own desires. It requires *thanks living*. "Gratitude and grace, linguistic cousins, are integral to our faith and fundamental to a Christian spirituality. The ability to give thanks feeds our spirit like oxygen sustains our bodies" (Keith Howard). Thanksgiving is so much more than being grateful for good fortune. We do not thank God for happiness as such, but for the inner assurance that we are being led by God to do what we do. It means going out and sowing, even if we weep as we sow. It means sowing in faith that God can turn tears into songs of joy, and the songs of joy that are harvested from tears resound to the gates of heaven. Unlike John Lennon, we can't imagine life without possessions. Or can we? Can we overcome our attachment to wealth? "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." (Mark 10:27). May it be so. Thanks be to God.

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