

Thanksgiving

Yesterday I visited a longtime member who is no longer able to get to church. Somehow it seemed appropriate on the day before Thanksgiving to check in with him and thank him for all of his service to the cathedral over many years. We talked about a number of things, and I was struck once again by how his current situation has made him much more reflective. He is not where he would like to be nor doing what he desires to do, but he has made peace with his situation and is grateful that there is a place for him to be.

It's a thankful time of year – although as my friend pointed out, even thankfulness is getting swallowed up by the mad dash to shop for Christmas. “Mad” is my word, not his, but the appropriate one. There is a certain amount of insanity in jumping up from the Thanksgiving table or getting up at oh-dark-thirty to be among the first at sales and store openings. Once again I'm reminded of what Miroslav Volf said here last June: shopping can be thought of as a kind of prayer, because in buying things we seek something that will make us happy. We just don't know that we are actually seeking God.

If we are not aware that by shopping we are seeking God, we are certainly not aware that even the ability to buy things comes from God's grace. The first reading this morning, from Deuteronomy, is all about God's grace. Moses tells the people of Israel that God is bringing them to a land of bounty, a place where they will find everything they need. Moses knows very well that once they get there and settle in, they'll forget God and think that they're the ones responsible for their good fortune. People today still say that what they have, they earned, even if it comes from an inheritance. Their reluctance to part with it becomes apparent when they are asked for a contribution. So Moses' words are still relevant today: “Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.’” It is God's gift and grace that provided it.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians provides the same message from a different angle. Even if God does provide every blessing, what then should we do with those blessings? Keep them to ourselves? No, Paul says. They are given to us so that we can give them away. Paul believes in a theology of abundance rather than scarcity, a sense that there is plenty to go around. Our culture is one of scarcity, where we are told that we can never have enough. Believing in abundance leads to generosity, and generosity produces an overflowing of thanksgivings to God. If this sounds like a reading for a stewardship Sunday, that's because Paul is urging the Corinthians to contribute toward his collection for the church in Jerusalem.

The familiar Gospel story of the ten lepers follows the same theme of gratitude. All ten were healed by Jesus, yet only one came back to thank him. And he was a Samaritan, the one who was least expected to be thankful. Jesus was quick to point that out. When he tells the man that his faith made him well, it's as if his spirit were healed as well as his body.

Last Monday I served at the Salvation Army dinner for the first time in a while. I like to be in the room with the diners, pouring milk. Every time I do that, I am struck by how grateful people are for just a cup of cold milk. I hear "thank you" again and again.

Recently Raisin contributed a column to the Clinton Herald in which she told a story that I have permission to repeat. She talked about her former work with the Episcopal Agape Café in Iowa City, which still today provides a free hot breakfast made to order every Wednesday morning for homeless and low-income people. Anyone who walks through the door is welcomed and fed. Raisin described how one of the regulars was always grumpy and said little. (If he's the person I remember, he sat by himself and discouraged anyone from joining him.) One day he carried his dirty dishes straight to the kitchen instead of leaving them on the table for the wait staff. Raisin stopped and thanked him for being a regular, for coming that day, and for bringing his dishes to the kitchen. He muttered and started to walk away. Then he turned around and said that no one had said thank you to him for many years. Somehow an expression of gratitude had gotten through his grumpiness.

It is hard enough for us to remember to give thanks to God for all that we have. Sometimes it's even harder to remember to thank others for what they have done for us and for those people and institutions whom we love. Harder yet is being able to receive the thanks of others. So today, Thanksgiving Day, when I tell you to say "Be thankful," I'm asking you to express your thanks not only to God but to each other, and also to all whom you encounter. Be thankful that they are in your lives. Receive their thanks graciously. And when you do go shopping during these few weeks of insanity, remember that it is God that you are seeking – God, and perhaps that perfect gift that best expresses your thanks to someone you love.

[Thanksgiving Day: Deuteronomy 8:7-18; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15; Luke 17:11-19.]