

Thanksgiving, 2019

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

This morning on our Thanksgiving Sunday I come before you with a particularly thankful heart. You probably can't tell, but what I describe as my "inner tigger" is alive, well, and bouncing. You remember Tigger from Winne the Pooh stories, right? A very exuberant, happy creature, always bouncing around, with a flair for looking on the bright side. In fact, Sydney Pollard is a great little tigger who always gives me joy when she shakes my hand as she leaves church, because she invariably holds on to my hand and bounces exuberantly, every single time. It's awesome! I don't bounce near as well as Sydney, but today my inner tigger is bouncing with gratitude, because our son became engaged to be married yesterday. He will be marrying a lovely young woman named Galina, whom we all love, and both Phil and I are so happy and thankful. All parents of adult children know that having your children being a part of a loving relationship is a huge blessing and cause for giving thanks. So, I can't help stop that inner tigger from bouncing a bit as I am thankful for this engagement.

But that's not the only reason I am particularly thankful today, there's another--- and contrary to what you might expect, it's not just that the Vikings staged a magnificent and heart-stopping comeback last week! No, prior to that game, there was another cause for gratitude. Our council met last Sunday after worship. Simply considering all that God has worked among us in the past few months, as we did, is ample cause for gratitude. Since our last meeting, August 19, this congregation accessed funding for our kitchen

renovation, had a very successful fundraising effort for that kitchen, actually renovated the kitchen, pulled off a Fall Food and Fun Festival on Sept. 8, served nearly 300 fishcake dinners—without a furnace or hot water---on Nov. 1, had all of our regular start ups of fall programs and activities, thanked a retiring custodian and hired a new one, started a new confirmation program, worshipped every Sunday, are slightly ahead in general giving over general budget, and are heading towards Julebyen and Christmas! Honestly, a congregation of any size, would be grateful to have a list of blessings and accomplishments like that;! It's not of course, that all has been perfect by any means, but we can still declare with confidence that God is good, and that God has blessed us to be a blessing! Those are certainly two of the fundamental components of celebrating any kind of holy day of Thanksgiving—the goodness of God and being blessed to bless others-- and we see both of these components present in our Old Testament lesson this morning from Deuteronomy.

This lesson is presented as Moses passing along instructions from God to the Hebrew people, prior to their entrance into the promised land. As you recall, the Hebrew people had been enslaved by the Egyptians for years and years, and then God led them out of slavery into freedom, through the event of the Exodus. Once they were free, they didn't necessarily handle the transition all that well. They created a Golden Calf to worship, they complained about the food and the accommodations, and they actually ended up living as a nomadic desert people for 40 years. God provided manna and quail for them, and they moved from place to place for a generation or two, before they stood poised to enter Canaan. But throughout their years of both slavery and living a nomadic

lifestyle, God was with them, providing for them. And now, as they enter this new land, they will again be experiencing God's bounty. Moses urges them to enter the land, settle in it, harvest, and give back to the Lord from the bounty of their harvest. He also teaches them a kind of creed, a little like our Apostle's Creed, and this creed in Deuteronomy is considered by many scholars to be the earliest creed in Scripture: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he came 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." This creed lifts up one of the two components of Thanksgiving I mentioned: it reminds the people of all the ways in which God has been good to them, all the blessings they have received from God's hand. That is one of the fundamental purposes of creeds, if you think about it. Often we say the Apostle's Creed, which speaks of God as Father or Creator; Son or Savior; and Holy Spirit or Sustainer; offering a summary of our faith, but also giving us cause to be thankful; because God is among us as Creator, Savior, and Sustainer. We need to be reminded of that, so we don't forget or take for granted the goodness of God, that first component of Thanksgiving.

But this passage from Deuteronomy does more than highlight God's goodness for the people; it also continues the theme throughout the Old Testament that God blesses us

to be a blessing, the second component of Thanksgiving. This concept dates back as far as Abraham and Sarah, about 500 years earlier than the setting of today's lesson, and it will continue on through all of the law and prophets to come. In this instance, Moses is urging the people to recognize that their bounty, specifically their food, the bounty of the land, is a gift from God and meant to be shared. Our final verse reads, "You shall celebrate with *all* the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house." This isn't only a well-intentioned concept; it was a practical necessity.

As the people entered the land, the logistics involved in actually settling into a new country included distribution of land. All Hebrew men and their families were to receive land to work. However, there was an exception to this rule: the Levites, the priestly tribe of Israel, were not to receive land. Nor would those who were not Hebrew, but were in fact "resident aliens", as our lesson describes them. And widows and orphans were also not apportioned land. So, Levites, resident aliens, and widows and orphans have no land to work; how are they to eat? There is a plan in place. All those who work the land and experience the bounty of God, inherent in God's created order, are to bring the first fruits of their harvest to the temple. Not to support the temple itself, *per se*, but to be distributed to the Levites, the resident aliens, the widows, and the orphans. And as one of the bright thinkers pointed out at our Lectio group on Tuesday morning, this was like the 12<sup>th</sup> C. BC version of the Two Harbors Food Shelf. And so it is! Those who have more than enough share with those who are lacking.

Isn't this vision of God's an amazing and trust-based vision of how humanity ought to function? Amazing, because God provides bounty through the

goodness of the created order. And remember it's not a zero sum game, we don't just reap exactly what we sow. You plant an apple seed, you don't just get one apple; over time, you get a tree that provides hundreds of apples for years and years. God is exuberant and generous in the provisions of Creation. There is enough, more than enough, if we steward and share wisely.

But the sharing part is where the trust comes in. Notice that the people are instructed to bring in the first fruits of their harvest. So, it's not about waiting until you know exactly how rich your harvest will be and that all your debts are paid and then you decide how much from the extra that you will share with others. No. It's about giving from the top, because you trust the provision of God for the rest. And you recognize the reality of the need of others for you to respond to God's generosity with generosity of your own. In fact, Moses several times reminds the people that although they stand now on the brink of prosperity, it was not always so; they were also slaves, aliens, homeless nomads, and they are to remember the needs of those who now find themselves in those situations. Which takes trust. Trust between people and God; trust between people and people. This is a vision that calls for a lot of trust. But it's also a vision in which we recognize with gratitude the source of our blessings, and in which no one goes wanting.

Is this vision of God's an accomplished reality? Of course not! Sin and brokenness are always a part of our human reality, and so are greed and anxiety. We do not always wisely steward our land and resources. We do not always find the courage and trust to share bounty with others. And if you look closely around you at the world these days, you could find reason to be fearful and grasping; climate change threatens the

created order, impeachment hearings are in the news, wealth disparity continues, everyone's mad at everyone, and so on. But just like that apple tree seed that yields so abundantly, God is at work in this world and even among us, planting seeds that also yield abundant hope and generosity for others.

Take, for example, the God's Barnyard project, the mission project for our Children's Church, our Kid's Connect, and our VBS. Or at least it started that way some years ago, but it became a mission project that all of us took to heart. So much so that last year we won the Holy Cow award for our Synod for our giving to combat world hunger. Out of 132 congregations in our synod, we had the highest per capita giving to world hunger of all of them. That little seed of wanting to share blessings has blossomed into huge generosity for all kinds of families in developing nations that we will never know, but we have made a difference for them by sharing of our bounty.

The same is true of our support of the food shelf. Think how good I felt when a clergy colleague who recently became a part of the governing board for the Two Harbors food shelf said to me in a public meeting, "Your congregation is a huge part of the volunteer and monetary support of the food shelf"! I mean, if your church is going to have a reputation in the area, wouldn't you rejoice to know it's a reputation for generosity? We can never out give God. But, we live according to God's vision, when we turn our own bounty and blessings into bounty and blessings for others. That's how God intends it to work.

Celebrating a day of Thanksgiving then, offers us the opportunity to again affirm these two fundamental truths: that God is good and deserving of thanks. And that

we are blessed to be a blessing to others. God provides bounty and we are to share it. As we gather around tables this coming Thursday to visit and eat and give thanks, I hope we may remember these things. And as we gather this morning around a table to share in a holy meal of Holy Communion, we can experience these truths yet again, as we do every Sunday. Christ, the Bread of Life, is our host, offering us His very self to nurture, heal, and forgive us. God is good. And we leave this altar table fed and nourished to be sources of nurture, healing, and forgiveness for others. Blessed to be a blessing. It's good news! If reflecting on all of this makes you want to release your inner tiger and do a bit of bouncing, feel absolutely free! God is good! And we are blessed to be a blessing!

Amen.

