

Sunday, October 9, 2016
Thanksgiving

Our first reading this morning is from the book of Deuteronomy, which in Hebrew is titled "These are the Words." This Hebrew title is very fitting because this book is Moses' farewell address to the people before they pass into the promised land and just before he dies. The first part of this book recalls the events which brought the people out of slavery in Egypt. The verses that we will hear this morning deal with various laws that Moses wanted to highlight for the people, so that they might always remember that it was God who delivered them. The offering of first fruits had long been a custom of the people which has helped them to honour the turning of the seasons and recognition of God found in all of nature. The declaration of faith in the second half of the reading serves to change the focus from the world itself to God's work in the world throughout history.

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

¹Once you enter the land that God, your God, is giving you as an inheritance and take it over and settle down, ²you are to take some of all the first fruits of what you grow in the land that God, your God, is giving you, put them in a basket and go to the place God, your God, sets apart for you to worship him. ³At that time, go to the priest who is there and say, "I announce to God, your God, today that I have entered the land that God promised our ancestors that he'd give to us." ⁴The priest will take the basket from you and place it on the Altar of God, your God. ⁵And there in the Presence of God, your God, you will recite,

A wandering Aramean was my father,
he went down to Egypt and sojourned there,
he and just a handful of his brothers at first, but soon
they became a great nation, mighty and many.

⁶The Egyptians abused and battered us,
in a cruel and savage slavery.

⁷We cried out to God, the God-of-Our-Fathers:
He listened to our voice, he saw
our destitution, our trouble, our cruel plight.

⁸And God took us out of Egypt
with his strong hand and long arm, terrible and great,
with signs and miracle-wonders.

⁹And he brought us to this place,
gave us this land flowing with milk and honey.

¹⁰So here I am. I've brought the first fruits
of what I've grown on this ground you gave me, O God.

Then place it in the Presence of God, your God. Prostrate yourselves in the Presence of God, your God. ¹¹And rejoice! Celebrate all the good things that God, your God, has given you and your family; you and the Levite and the foreigner who lives with you.

The Gospel of John has been called the "Spiritual Gospel," written to give Christians a deeper understanding, and to reaffirm the fundamental understandings of the Christian faith. The reading today for John speaks of the need for "spiritual food" over and above the purely physical needs of food. There appears to be a call, from the disciples, for Jesus to replicate the miracle of Manna in the desert in which God provided bread for the wandering Israelite nation. This almost seems to be a condition of believing as they demand a sign that is not inferior to the feeding of the people with Manna. Jesus is trying to get the disciples to see that if they believe in the food which he is providing they will be given something far greater, eternal life.

John 6:25-35

²⁵When they found him back across the sea, they said, "Rabbi, when did you get here?"

²⁶Jesus answered, "You've come looking for me not because you saw God in my actions but because I fed you, filled your stomachs—and for free.

²⁷"Don't waste your energy striving for perishable food like that. Work for the food that sticks with you, food that nourishes your lasting life, food the Son of Man provides. He and what he does are guaranteed by God the Father to last."

²⁸To that they said, "Well, what do we do then to get in on God's works?"

²⁹Jesus said, "Throw your lot in with the One that God has sent. That kind of a commitment gets you in on God's works."

³⁰They waffled: "Why don't you give us a clue about who you are, just a hint of what's going on? When we see what's up, we'll commit ourselves. Show us what you can do. ³¹Moses fed our ancestors with bread in the desert. It says so in the Scriptures: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"

³²Jesus responded, "The real significance of that Scripture is not that Moses gave you bread from heaven but that my Father is right now offering you bread from heaven, the *real* bread. ³³The Bread of God came down out of heaven and is giving life to the world."

³⁴They jumped at that: "Master, give us this bread, now and forever!"

³⁵Jesus said, "I am the Bread of Life. The person who aligns with me hungers no more and thirsts no more, ever.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

THANKS BE TO GOD!

Sermon - "What is thankfulness?"

So, it is Thanksgiving, I can't believe that tomorrow is already the second Monday in October, it is like this year is flying by. So I am going to first off start with a bit of a complaint that I have. Now those of you who know me know that I love sappy romantic comedies. The problem that I have is that every movie about Thanksgiving is all based around the American Thanksgiving at the end of November, which leads into the Christmas season. The thing that I appreciate is the connection between the idea of Thanksgiving and the gift of God/love incarnate at Christmas. But I think that there is something important for us to remember when we think about what Thanksgiving can mean to us as Christians.

Last week I went to see the musical *The Book of Mormon*. Now this a very irreverent play that I would not recommend for everyone, but rather those who go to see this piece of theatre need to understand that it does contain some offensive language, but regardless I believe that there is something important in the play. So the premise of the play goes like this; there are a group of young mormon men who are preparing for their first appointment as missionaries. What is important is that each of these young men feel that their faith should give them everything that they want and so their gratitude is tied to how well they believe they have stayed true to their faith. The better they are the more likely that they will get whatever they want. So these two young men are sent to Uganda to spread the faith. When they get to their destination they struggle because those to whom they are sent do not seem to understand that to get all that they want they just need to understand faith in the same way that the young Mormon evangelists do. After failing miserably one of the young men Elder Cunningham starts to embellish the Mormon scriptures, but as he does this he begins to connect with the Ugandans and they start to understand the God might just be with them even in the midst of their huge day to day struggles. In the end the Ugandans begin to understand more about God then they ever thought possible and they came to truly believe in God who is with them and is a part of everything.

This week's reading comes just after Jesus feeds the multitude. So here is this huge crowd of people and Jesus has them sit down and he ends up feeding them all, with a whole lot to spare, from these 5 loaves and 2 fish, they end up with 12 baskets of food left over. Even after all those people had had enough to eat. Immediately following this Jesus just disappears on them. The disciples go looking for him and then the crowd follows the next day and they all eventually find Jesus on the other side of the Sea of Galilee and this is where this interaction takes place. But Jesus begins this interaction by accusing the people of only wanting Jesus to feed them, just as he had done the previous day. So not only did Jesus disappear, but he then accuses the crowd of only wanting something from Jesus. But as usual Jesus then flips things and begins to talk about this other kind of "bread," this bread, that if you eat it, you will never go hungry. This is really difficult for the people to understand because just like the Ugandans they could not understand what really was happening in the context of their own lives, see their lives were a

struggle just to have enough to eat and here is Jesus promising so much more and so I wonder if this disbelief is where the crowd is at this point in the story.

Alan Brehm, who writes the blog “The Walking Dreamer” states it in this way, “In a sense, he said they followed him not because they were trusted in him and in God’s cause of peace and justice and freedom in the world, but because they had a good meal.” So to truly believe in that God of peace, justice and freedom, there needed to be something more, it would seem that those who followed Jesus would believe that Jesus might be the Messiah only after he would give them manna from heaven as Moses had done during the exodus.

It seems that although there might have been a huge surprise when Jesus had fed them all the previous day, it still raises the question did they even see it as a miracle, did they really understand what happened.

Once again it seems as if Jesus is speaking of faith and all the people are looking for is tangible proof, tangible results. I suppose the question that must be asked is when will you once again need more results to bolster your faith again? When will the results be enough that you will not have to ask for any more, or will that day ever come?

But hold on a second here. I think that we might just have to give the people of Jesus’ time a bit of a break here. These are people who have been conquered by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and now they are living under the rule of Rome. They wanted a king, but a king like David, a warrior, or Moses, a deliverer, who would throw off the yoke of oppression and allow them to live as a free people. So what harm could there be in asking for miracle like what happened with the manna. In reality it could be seen that everything is at risk for the people. They are being asked to believe in something that is brand new. The thing is that the people are not being asked to believe in what they themselves do, but rather they are being asked to believe in what God is doing. This is the same thing that we are being asked today. Will we believe in what God is doing?

What might this mean for us today? Especially given that it is Thanksgiving Day.

Our Prayer of Approach this morning says, “What if thankfulness is not something to be grasped, not something that can be simply said, not something at all? What if thankfulness is transformation; a revolution of the heart, a re-centering, from ourselves to your Son? What if thankfulness is a blossoming, from bud to flower, all the way to the ripe red apple, a movement from life to death and beyond the grave to resurrection? What if Thanksgiving is Christmas, Good Friday and Easter all rolled into one?

What if today instead of making list of those things that we are thankful for, we are being called into something else, something deeper?

Our anthem this morning “Canon of Thanks,” states “Count your blessings one by one, and praise the work that God has done.” We are called to be offer gratitude but also to see God’s work.

There are a lot of studies that are currently being published that are examining gratitude. The journal Psychiatry, published an article a few years ago which studied the connection between gratitude and well-being. For the purposes of the study the authors believe that gratitude was, **“Gratitude is the appreciation of what is valuable and meaningful to oneself and represents a general state of thankfulness and/or appreciation.”** According to many of these studies gratitude can and does lead to greater feelings of well-being.

For me it is important to understand that gratitude is valuable and meaningful to oneself, but God is calling us to be grateful for what we have, but also for what God is doing. You see I think thanksgiving goes beyond just simple gratitude.

In our Gospel reading this morning the people could not see beyond their desires, to the bigger picture of God incarnate in Jesus. Without tangible proof they struggle to see God alive, and when they can't see that they don't understand what it means to live into the kingdom of God. I believe that thanksgiving is a recognition of what God has done in the world and then to bring that to others.

It is a call for us to believe, to truly believe in God working in the world and to be a part of that work, as we come to see the blessings of God.

I think that at Thanksgiving we need to be aware of not only how we have been blessed and all the things that we have been thankful for, but also the One who has given us all of creation.

Then Thanksgiving becomes not something that we do once a year, but it becomes the way in which we live our lives.

It transforms us into a people who can recognize all of creation as a gift from God, but one that we are called to continue.

Martin Luther, you know that man who nailed those theses to the door of the church. He stated, "God does not need your good works, but your neighbor does." because Thanksgiving should not be about thanking God for what we have, rather it should be about bringing the blessings of God to the world to live a life of thanksgiving in all that we do, recognizing God in the world each and every day. Amen.