

Giving Thanks By Tim Hall

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost (A) – November 19, 2017 – Celebrating Thanksgiving

[RCL:] Deuteronomy 8:7-18; Psalm 65, 2 Corinthians 9:6-15; Luke 17:11-19

What do we give thanks for? I don't know about you, but I'm often giving thanks for small things, like getting out of the house in the morning without forgetting anything... especially my car keys! Or for the privilege of experiencing a beautiful sunset or, recently, for the stunning trees alight with amazing Autumn color. Or for the blessing of having shared time on this planet with loved ones now gone, or people that affected my life through music or art or deeds of hard work and sacrifice that have changed the world for the better.

Today we celebrate Thanksgiving in songs and Bible readings and prayers. It's a joyous and heartfelt celebration of God's bounty and provision and, as we read in that beautiful passage from Deuteronomy, has been an institution since the time of Moses, more than 3,500 years.

While giving thanks to God has been a long held tradition, Thanksgiving Day as an official American holiday didn't come into being until 1863, when President Abraham Lincoln, at the height of the Civil War, entreating Americans to ask God to "commend to his tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife" and to "heal the wounds of the nation."

Some historians contend that the earliest thanksgiving celebrations between Europeans and Native Americans were either in St. Augustine, Florida in 1565 or along the banks of the James River in Virginia in 1619. However, most historians trace the roots of our Thanksgiving to Plymouth, Massachusetts and the harvest feast that took place between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag tribe., and that is what we traditionally celebrate.

However, as we know in our hearts, the true story is not all sunshine and daisies. Here's an excerpt from a story I read in The Huffington Post from a few years ago:

"If you happen to spend Thanksgiving in Plymouth Massachusetts this year, you can choose between two public commemorations. You can watch the official parade, in which townspeople dressed like pilgrims march to Plymouth Rock bearing blunderbusses and beating drums [and then repair to their homes for the usual feasting and football]. Or you can stand on the top of Coles Hill with indigenous people and their supporters and fast in observance of what they call a "national day of mourning" in remembrance of the destruction of Indian culture and peoples."

You see, so often our blessings may come at the expense of others. And true thankfulness arises from us trying, in our hearts and in our lives, to make amends for past wrongs... be they ours, our fellow citizens, or our ancestors. On a personal level, I often give thanks as a sort of restitution for bad behavior. When something frustrates me and I cry out in anger, then I try to remember that God is good and give thanks for that goodness. Or when I realize I have

behaved badly, I seek to amend my ways and ask God to forgive me, giving thanks for God's amazing grace.

And this is what we need to do as a people, as a nation, as the body of Christ. In the current VA Episcopalian, the Fall 2017 edition, there is a story on The Triangle of Hope, a joint effort by the Diocese of Virginia joining with the Diocese of Kumasi, in Ghana, and the Diocese of Liverpool, England. Their goals are epitomized in the following statement:

"We stand together, determined that the horror of slavery, and its memories of inhumanity, oppression and anguish, must not and will not be forgotten. We commit ourselves to learn from these memories and to ensure that the lessons are shared and embedded in our lives and in our Dioceses. We also stand together in opposing all forms of slavery today, and we are wholeheartedly committed to doing all we can to help those caught in its chains, and to advocate for justice and freedom and for an end to all modern slavery and human trafficking."

I give thanks for the Dioceses of Virginia and Kumasi and Liverpool for their courage in addressing our past failings as a nation and a people and ask, what can we do as individuals and as a church to further this cause? On this, our stewardship Sunday, we can start by making a new or renewed commitment to give back to the church with our time, talent, and treasure, We should remember and reflect on the words of our Old Testament lesson, *"Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.' But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth"*.

And from Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians, *"God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work."* And later, *"You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God."*

In this world where we are surrounded by so many distressing things, we realize that life is fragile and evil is real. We need to remember, indeed it is the one thing that gives our life comfort and meaning, that in the face of all this... God is sure. Sure in his promise made to us throughout time, across generations, and by the gift of his son, Jesus Christ, that he will be with us to the end of the age. And we should endeavor to live our lives accordingly, returning like that lone Samaritan in our Gospel this morning, to give him thanks for his blessings. And giving him thanks at all times even in the face of challenges, adversity, and even death, returning to him, with thanksgiving, when we go astray like lost sheep.

I'd like to close with some excerpts from Bishop Susan Goff's sabbatical report, as I think they provide a wonderful reflection of the challenges with which we are faced and the redeeming power of God's love, and our resulting actions, through Jesus Christ:

"Again and again during the sabbatical time, during travels in South Africa and later in Italy, I came face to face with the pain that is part of the ongoing legacy of racism. I witnessed the dire suffering of refugees and saw again, as if in a mirror, the ways that

my privilege as a white person with resources conspires to shield me from the pain of others.

I remained off balance for a time after sabbatical trips. It wasn't just jet lag and tiredness from the long, long days of travel. Instead, seeing sites of violence and suffering in other lands, touching evidence of the enduring legacy of racism in other cultures, shone a scorching light on the evil legacy of racism and especially the growing xenophobia in my own land, in my own culture. My heart was broken. My head was spinning. And I didn't want to get back to "normal."

Now my "new normal" is more firmly rooted than ever before in the knowledge that my joy in this world, my delight, is never separate from the well-being of others. It is never separate from the pain of others, never separate from the cry for justice for all God's beloved ones. My joy in this dark, broken, beautiful world is bound to the needs, the fears, the suffering, the hope and the delight of others. In that joy I hope always to remain a little off balance, a little heartbroken, for the sake of deeper relationship with God, with other people and with all of God's creation."

Susan's words are an inspiring reminder of how all our lives are intertwined and how God seeks our service and deserves our thanks at all times.

Amen