

Psalm 103:1-5

Thanksgiving Sunday

Lessons for the Day: Deuteronomy 8:1-10; Philippians 4:6-20; Luke 17:11-19

The Village of Fools - a Thanksgiving Parable

October 7, 2018

“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Many years ago, in a land far away, there was a very poor village in the midst of a desolate and barren land. The inhabitants were half-starved, for they could barely grow any food in the rocky soil that surrounded their village. One evening, a wealthy nobleman passed through the village. As the hour had grown late, he decided to stay the night. He called out to the first person he saw, “My good man! Could you show me the way to the inn?” “The inn?” the villager asked. “We have no inn. We never had much use for one here. But won't you come and stay at my house?”

The nobleman accepted the humble invitation. When the other villagers heard about the stranger who was to spend the night there, they quickly gathered together the best that they had and prepared a “feast” for him. The nobleman was so impressed with their hospitality, and so moved by their poverty, that he vowed to help them. A few months later, a large freight wagon drawn by a team of horses arrived at the village. It was loaded down with grain, dried fruit, salted meat, and cheese. Soon another wagon came, carrying bolts of warm, sturdy cloth for garments, and wood, bricks, and straw for repairing the shacks and hovels that the villagers called homes.

The people of the village received these gifts with great joy, realizing that their visitor had become their benefactor. The more learned among them sat down at once and wrote long thank-you letters. Then they held a town meeting, and deliberated at great length about erecting a statue of their benefactor if only they could afford to do it.

As the weeks, months, and years passed, the wagon loads continued to come regularly. But it also happened that, as time passed, the villagers began to take their benefactor for granted. The once-regular letters of gratitude became an annual formality, a disagreeable duty, and soon the people dispensed with the letters altogether.

Many years later, the nobleman, who by now had become even wealthier, was travelling through that part of the world. He decided to stop and visit “his” village. As he neared the place, he was pleased to see sturdy houses with thatched roofs where flimsy shacks had once stood. But the surrounding fields looked as if they had lain fallow for years. The villagers, he noticed, had grown fat, and he saw that most of them were sitting idly in the middle of the day. Through an open window, he saw a few women sewing dresses from the latest shipment of cloth. He overheard one of them complaining, “This miserable cloth! Why couldn't we be sent some ready-sewn clothes?”

The nobleman approached a dour-faced young man who was coming toward him and asked, “My good fellow, do you know where I might find lodging for the night?” The young man shrugged. “Why don't you ask someone else?” he retorted. “I'm too busy. I'm the only one around these parts who works.” “What sort of work do you do?” asked the nobleman. The young man shrugged again in disgust, “I'm the town miller. Every so often, we get a huge cartload of grain, and I'm the one who gets stuck with the bothersome task of grinding it into flour.” He hurried off without another word or a backward glance.

The nobleman searched and found the small house where he had first received shelter so long ago. He knocked, and a familiar face appeared. It was the son of the villager who had first given him lodging. “I have travelled far, and I am weary,” he explained. “May I spend the night with your family?” “We don't appreciate strangers in these parts,” came the gruff reply, “but if you really must stay, there's an inn down the road.”

Incensed, the nobleman turned and left the village. He immediately cancelled all further deliveries of food and supplies. Then the villagers, who by now had forgotten how to farm and how to work, found themselves in worse condition than before.

Those villagers had acted foolishly. They had forgotten their benefactor, and had neglected to give him thanks. They had taken his gifts for granted, and had even despised some of them because of the inconvenience of putting them to use. Perhaps worst of all, they had not recognized their benefactor when he came to them, and they had treated him badly.

What is really sad about this parable is the fact that it describes all too clearly the way things often are today. Many people, including many Christians, have long forgotten the source of all the good things we enjoy in the world. Let's put ourselves into the parable. We are the poor people, struggling to live in a bare and desolate land. Oh, we may not be struggling for our daily bread, and we may have comforts and possessions that the people in the parable would envy. But the truth is that our existence is empty and futile. Even if we have it all in this world, there are things we cannot avoid. We cannot avoid the reality of death—and with physical death also comes the more terrible reality of eternal death, where there is emptiness and desolation greater than anything this world has ever known. Try as hard as we will, we cannot change the inevitable, for our hearts are desolate too, because of the sin that is so much a part of us.

There is Someone who can, and does, make a difference. In Jesus Christ, God has come to live among us, and to know the bitterness of our lives. He sees our struggles. He sees the emptiness of sin. And He is determined to change our wretched condition. It will take more than a few wagons of food and supplies. It will require the very life of the Lord who comes to us. Jesus gives His life on a cross for us. He dies to take away our sin, and He rises to usher in the new life He has prepared for us. But He also blesses us with every other blessing in life, too. James said: ***“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.”*** (James 1:17, ESV) And Paul said: ***“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”*** (Romans 8:32, ESV) We have every reason to give thanks today, for our God has blessed us. He is good to us. He has given us life as His people, and He provides for our lives day by day. He is our benefactor, who, as Luther said: *daily and richly provides me with all that I need to support this body and life.* (SC, 1st Article) We are surrounded by the goodness of God. We have life, including eternal life as His gift to us. That is why David declares in this psalm: ***“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.”***

Oh, there are times when thanks flows from us. When we experience God's miraculous grace, perhaps through healing after surgery or in some deliverance from earthly trouble, we will shout our thanks to our God. But are there not also times when we, like that village of fools, take God and His goodness for granted? We enjoy our daily bread, but do we stop before our meals to acknowledge the goodness of the One who provides that bread each day? We have the blessings of forgiveness, but aren't always eager to confess to our heavenly Father. We can fall into the temptation of worshipping only when it is convenient, or we get so caught up in the things of life that we let them become more important to us than the Giver of every good and perfect gift. We may even complain that we want more than the good gifts that God has already chosen to give us, in accordance with His perfect wisdom and love.

In our Old Testament lesson, Moses told the people who were entering the Promised Land: ***“And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not.”*** (Deuteronomy 8:2, ESV) We saw in our Gospel lesson how 9 out of 10 lepers forgot to say thanks for the healing they received. God makes it clear again and again just how much He loves us, and how much He wants to bless us. He wants to forgive us, no matter what we have done. He wants to give us life in its fulness, both now and eternally. But He also does not want us to take Him for granted. It's not that He needs our thanks to boost His ego. It's just that when we take Him for granted, when we forget Him, we are in danger of thinking we can do without Him. We pat ourselves on the back for all that we have done for ourselves. But we cannot live without Him. Our very existence, including every beat of our

hearts and every breath we take, happens only by His grace. Without Him, we are nothing.

David knew that God's goodness was worthy of ongoing praise and thanks. His works make us glad. God forgives us. He heals us. He provides for us. He deserves our praise, morning, noon and night—and not just on Thanksgiving Sunday. God wants to bless us. He has, and He will bless us, even beyond our ability to thank Him. In fact, we can never repay the debt of gratitude we owe. But we can remember Him and thank Him as we live in the blessings of the life He gives, and show through our lives that we know and remember the source of all our blessings is from our Saviour and our God. Amen.