

Deuteronomy 8:7-18

⁷ For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, ⁸ a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, ⁹ a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. ¹⁰ You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that has been given you.

¹¹ Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God, by failing to keep the commandments, the ordinances, and the statutes, which I am commanding you today. ¹² When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, ¹³ and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, ¹⁴ then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, ¹⁵ who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. The Lord your God made water flow for you from flint rock, ¹⁶ and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. ¹⁷ Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth." ¹⁸ But remember the Lord your God, who gives you power to get wealth, in order that the covenant sworn to your ancestors may be confirmed, as, in fact, the Lord your God is doing today.

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Remember the Lord Your God

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Date: November 24, 2002

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Text: Deuteronomy 8:7-18.

There is a tension in our beliefs, or at least there is in mine. There used to be a poster in the parlor. It said, "I used to think somebody ought to do something. Then I realized I am somebody." It meant that each of us can make a difference, if we make the effort.

Pulling at the other end of the rope, though, is the idea that the bounty comes from God. In the passage we heard this morning from Deuteronomy, God says, "¹⁷Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.'" ¹⁸But remember the Lord your God, who gives you power to get wealth."

So, is it we, or do things come from God?"

There is the story of a young man who bought a farm. He and his wife were from a long way away, and when they bought the farm, a lot of people laughed. The old Fairchild farm had lain fallow for many years. Brush and tangles had grown up in the fields. The barns were falling down. The roofs leaked and pieces of the siding had fallen completely off. No one in their right mind would buy the Fairchild farm.

But the young man and his wife did. And they worked day and night to make the place into a producing farm. By the second year they had transformed the place. The fields had been tilled free of undergrowth. In them straight the rows of the crops alternated in green bands with the rich brown bands of the earth. The new tin roofs shone brightly on the barns. New boards replaced the holes in the siding. People were amazed. The old Fairchild farm had been transformed into a farm anyone in the county would be proud of.

One day the minister came by for a visit. The minister noted that he hadn't seen much of the young man and his family in church. And the young man looked around at the farm and said, "Well, we've been pretty busy right here." The minister looked around at the beautiful farm. He nodded in appreciation. "Farm sure does look good," he said. "Yep, it sure is a wonderful job God has done with this place."

The young man let the comment go. He offered the minister a drink of tea. In the house the minister looked around, again with appreciation, at the condition of the house. "Nice job God did on the old house, that's for sure." The young man just said, "Yes, sir," though he was biting his lip a bit.

After tea, they walked through the newly repaired barns. And again the minister allowed that God had done wonderful job on the barns. By now the young man was glad the visit was about over, and he escorted the minister to his car.

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The minister took one more look around and said, “Yes sir, God sure has done a wonderful job with this place.” Finally, the young man took the bait. As politely as he could, given that his irritation was about to boil over, he said, “Reverend, you keep saying that God did all these wonderful things around here. Just what do you mean by that?”

The minister answered, “Well young fella, God is the source of everything. Ah yes, young fella, we do very little. It’s all God.”

The young man thought for a moment. Then he said, “Is that so? Is that so? Well, Reverend, you should have seen this place when God was working on it alone.”

Is it we? Or do things come from God?

*** We human beings are a funny lot. The people who have the most seem to be the most certain that they are solely responsible for what they have. According to the wealthy, the wealthy earn it. This fact has been an unending frustration for God. God has this chosen people. God has this chosen people Israel. Now, it didn’t go all that well with the people Israel in the desert with Moses. They complained about the food and the water and the bad directions. They even built a golden calf, which really made God as mad as a hatter.

But if truth be told, God was far more worried about when the people got to the promised land than God was ever worried in the desert. In the desert the people were grumpy and stiff-necked a lot of the time, but they knew who delivered them when their backs were against the sea. They knew who provided water when they thought they would die of thirst and manna when they thought they would faint from hunger. True, God’s people are always a handful, even at their best. Does that sound like any of God’s people you know?

But God was really worried, though, that when they got to the promised land, “a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, ⁸ a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, ⁹ a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing,” God worried that when they got there they would exalt themselves and forget the Lord their God.

Among some families there is a Thanksgiving dinner custom. Set beside each plate are five kernels of dried corn. And around the Thanksgiving table each family member, one after another, tells the rest five things they have been thankful for the year.

Do any of you know where the custom comes from? [wait] Legend and maybe history has it that when the Pilgrims came to Plymouth, blown far off course from their intended landing in Virginia, and with winter coming on, when the Pilgrims came to Plymouth, they were hardly prepared. Indeed, the sea voyage itself in those days was harsh, perhaps even a reckless thing to do. The advertisements of the time advised that the first order of business before undertaking a transatlantic voyage was to write out your will. But even after safe arrival, the Pilgrims faced the winter wholly unprepared. By spring over one half of the community had perished. During January and February it was not unusual to have two or three deaths a day among their small company. It is said that during the worst of it, each person had but five kernels of corn to eat each day.

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In April the Mayflower headed back to England, but the Pilgrims stayed in Plymouth, where by then they had befriended the Wampanoags. By fall they held a feast of thanksgiving. It is easy to get caught in the romance of the Pilgrim story. But whatever one thinks of those beginnings and their aftermath, two things stick out to me. In April, which T.S. Eliot identified as the cruelest month, in the cruel month of April, barely after the break of winter, this band of families let their ship sail home to the relative safety of England and remained in the new world to make a life. And in the fall, but eight months after a winter that had them bury half their loved ones, they held a feast in gratitude to God for the harvest and for their good fortune. I am impressed that in the face of such hardship and heartache they decided to stay. I am perhaps even more impressed that by fall they were celebrating their good fortune, when their fortune was mixed at best. And I am most impressed of all that after all the hard work on their parts to survive, they gave thanks to God.

I'm not certain why it is that after great loss, and survival still a question mark, the Pilgrims were moved to gratitude, or why the ancient Israelites, or Americans, for that matter, when they live in abundance, take most of the credit, with but a passing nod to God. I'm not sure why, but I do have a couple of guesses. First, many people I fear see God as a safety net. When they think they are doing fine on their own, God isn't that relevant. It's the flip side of the old saying that there are no atheists in fox holes.

A less cynical, though related, reason has its origins in farming. Safiya Sofua says, "The words "harvest" and "thanksgiving" are linked together in many cultures. Most who till the soil know that our feeble human efforts do not produce crops; crops require sun and rain and other variables that are beyond our control. The early settlers and the indigenous people they found here also recognized the importance of God's provision for survival. Hundreds of years later, a commemorative meal serves as a reminder for us to thank God for those things necessary for our survival."

Farmers as much as any people know that things are out of their control. They work hard, to be sure, but rain at the right time or hail at the wrong time make the difference between a crop and a failed harvest. When one lives close to the true rhythms of existence, it is much more difficult to fool oneself into believing that you control your world, and that you need be thankful only for your own good efforts, thank you very much.

The tradition of the five kernels of corn and saying aloud five things for which you are thankful, then, is a tradition which helps us remember how much of life is out of our control, help us remember how thankful a group in our history was even after they had lost so much and had so little, and helps us remember the Lord our God.

I rather vividly recall sitting in the pew in church as a child and listening to sermons. I recall sermons that hit a perfect ending point, and then went on for another ten minutes, ten minutes which rarely improved the thing, and quite often made a quite good sermon a quite bad one. I am aware that we have arrived at a logical ending point. You have been reminded of how little you control and admonished, even in your abundance to remember and give thanks to God. I have discharged my duty as a preacher in a true Calvinist way. I have told you that neither you

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nor things in general may be as good as they seem, and give the thanks to God. Well, I may not have said exactly that, but to my own way of thinking, we need a little better inspiration than I have given yet for admonishing you to gratitude, to thanksgiving. So, a few minutes more of your time, please.

Dennis Prager has written a book called, "Happiness Is a Serious Problem." "There is a 'secret to happiness,'" Prager writes, "and it is gratitude. All happy people are grateful, and ungrateful people cannot be happy. We tend to think that it is being unhappy that leads people to complain, but it is truer to say that it is complaining that leads to people becoming unhappy. Become grateful and you will become a much happier person."¹

Jeff Jacoby writes:

If you never give a moment's thought to the fact that your health is good, that your children are well-fed, that your home is comfortable, ... if you assume that the good things in your life are "normal" and to be expected, you diminish the happiness they can bring you. By contrast, if you train yourself to reflect on how much worse off you could be, if you develop the custom of counting your blessings and being grateful for them, you will fill your life with cheer.

It can be hard to do. Like most useful skills, it takes years of practice before it becomes second nature. This is one reason, Prager writes, that religion, sincerely practiced, leads to happiness - it ingrains the habits of thankfulness. People who thank God before each meal, for example, inculcate gratitude in themselves. In so doing, they open the door to gladness.

In a sense, gratitude is an expression of modesty. In Hebrew, the word for gratitude - *hoda'ah* - is the same as the word for confession. To offer thanks is to confess dependence, to acknowledge that others have the power to benefit you, to admit that your life is better because of their efforts.²

When God looked at the people Israel, whom God loved and whom God had chosen, God faced a very difficult dilemma. God wanted the people to know abundance, a land flowing with milk and honey, a good life. But God was afraid the people would not remember their God. Now, one way to understand God's worry is to say that God is a jealous God, a God who does not like to be forgotten. Maybe. But my guess is that the real dilemma God faced was that God wanted the people to have goodness, and to know joy, and that if they lost their sense of gratitude, they would, in fact, be miserable. There are a hundred more sermons on this point alone. There are a hundred sermons about how abundance without gratitude becomes

¹Quoted by Jeff Jacoby, "Boston Globe," November 23, 2000

²Ibid

consumerism, becomes greed, becomes jealousy, becomes an unquenchable hunger, threatens even to take the planet down. But for today, suffice it say, abundance without gratitude is a bottomless well of unhappiness. And life, whether facing hardship or knowing the good times, a life lived in gratitude, the life remembering the Lord your God, is a life that God has desired for you. A life of blessings and joy. Remember, then, the Lord your God. And be ye thankful always. Amen.

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