

Deuteronomy 8:1-10

Thanksgiving Day

November 26, 2020—Shepherd of the Mountains, Pinetop, AZ

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What does it mean to give thanks? A card sent to someone? A word spoken in person? A phone call to a grandparent or an aunt or uncle? (Nowadays it might be a video call.) These are the things we learned when we were kids. Expressions of gratitude. Usually the response is somewhat immediate. The same day. The following day. Within the week. Within so many months. Different protocols for different gifts and different occasions. But what is at the heart of giving thanks?

We have the same readings appointed every year for Thanksgiving Day. The healing of the 10 lepers in Luke. 10 are healed. Only one returns to give thanks. And we talk about the one who gave thanks as a model of Christian living. Paul's letter to the Philippians with the instructions to rejoice and to not be anxious. And with the instruction to pray to God for what we need, trusting in His mercy, we are told to give thanks. We talk about how that is the behavior of a Christian, living in thankfulness, which usually manifests itself in a peace that passes understanding, a joy that cannot be diminished by unpleasant circumstances in life.

And then there is our OT reading from Deuteronomy. But the word thanks or thanksgiving is found nowhere in the reading. There is the instruction in verse 10 to **"bless the Lord your God for the good land He has given you."** I suppose that could be construed as giving thanks. But what we really see in Deuteronomy is the heart of thanksgiving.

God's people are about to enter into the promised land. And they have instructions. **"The whole commandment that I command you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land that Yahweh swore to give to your fathers. And You shall remember..."** That's really the heart of giving thanks—remembering.

For many today, family and friends will gather around a table and share food. Prior Thanksgiving meals will be remembered. Stories will be remembered and retold. Good times and bad will be remembered. Some will be red faced as they remember that they were the ones who were supposed to pick up the whipped cream for the pie and that will turn into another event to be remembered at future gatherings.

For some, the crowd around the table will be fewer in number this year. Families spread out across the country or around the globe will be staying away, and staying healthy this year. And remembering will sustain us. For some a loved one who now rests from their labors will leave an empty seat. But remembering them and the good times will get those who remain through the holidays.

Most of us will remember previous years. And in years to come we will all remember the Thanksgiving of 2020 as just a part of the strangeness of the year.

Remembering is an essential part of life. It shapes who we are. It guides where we go in the future. And you can't give thanks for something you can't remember.

Deuteronomy means 2nd Law. It's not a new law. It's a 2nd giving of the law. God's people have been wandering for 40 years and learning to rely upon God's grace and God's provision as well as God's instructions. And before they are allowed to go into the promised land they are reminded of where they've been, because this will shape who they are to be in the land. And so through Moses' words they remember. They remember how God brought them out of the house of slavery in Egypt. They remember how He continued to provide for them and feed them. They remember how He protected them from their enemies along the way. They remember how they quarreled and tested God, and how God, in His mercy, still cared for them. They remember His promises of old to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And they remember that God has been and still is keeping this promise, even when the people resisted.

Remembering is essential because you can't give thanks for what you don't remember. And if you don't remember what God has commanded and promised, you don't even know how to give thanks.

In one of our Bible classes we've been talking about the 10 Commandments. Really, we've been talking about God's Law, 10 Commandments, plus over 600 other commandments for ceremonial and civic righteousness. And we have been remembering through our discussion, that following these laws aren't methods for making ourselves righteous. They were God's description of how His people should live. And they were instructive. But they weren't a self-help guide of "623 ways to get right with God."

The leprosy of sin had infected all of God's people. And yet, He called them to be His people. He had cared for them. He had provided means of grace through the OT sacrificial system to cover their sins. And their duty was to remember. Because that remembering—of everything God had already done as well as everything God promised He would do—would shape their lives, lives of thanksgiving, lives of living in thankful response to God's grace. That was to be the heart of life for God's people—living as people who remembered, living lives in thankful response, remembering that they were God's people, that they were called by grace to live as people of a promise. For God, giving thanks isn't a word or a card or a phone call. For God, giving thanks, living as thankful people means remembering whose you are and living accordingly.

The command to remember continues to this day. It's at the heart of the Great Commission with the command to teach and to observe all that Christ has commanded. It's at the heart of why we come to worship. Here we hear and remember what God has done. Here we remember that the leprosy of sin has infected all of us. And here we remember that Christ cleanses lepers, that He comes to the unclean, those who otherwise would be cut off from the Kingdom, and He makes them clean through His Word, through His teachings, through His innocent blood and His suffering and death.

And here we come to His meal. It's a meal of remembrance. It's a meal of thanksgiving. That's why it's sometimes called the "Eucharist" which means "thanksgiving." Because in this meal we remember that on the night that Jesus was betrayed He took bread and took a cup, and He commanded His disciples then and now to remember what it meant. He commanded them to remember what they would discover later and what we know now—that His body would be broken in death and His blood would be shed for the sin of the world, and then also remembering that His resurrection would conquer death for all who believe.

And so we remember. And we give thanks for all that God has done for us, for all that God has given us to sustain this body and life, and for all that He has promised that He will do still. And we remember and we give thanks by living as God's people.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, we have not yet entered into the eternal promised land. So today and all other days, we remember whose we are. We remember that we were purchased with a price. We remember that our sins have been covered. And we remember that God always remembers His promises to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, to Moses and the people of Israel, to the Apostles and early Church, and to you and me. And for all the things God has done for them and us and all that He promises to do still, we give Him our eternal thanks and praise, in words, in song, and in holy lives as His forgiven people. Amen.