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Abounding in Thanksgiving Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Colossians 2:6-7

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With the theme of our Stewardship Campaign this year being “Now Thank We All Our God”, and with the annual Thanksgiving holiday only a few weeks away, I’ve been thinking a good bit about what it means to be thankful. One thing I read that has really had me thinking is something the great English Catholic writer, G. K. Chesterton, once wrote:

You say grace before meals. All right, but I say grace before the concert and the opera, and grace before the play and the pantomime, and grace before I open a book, and grace before sketching, painting, swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, playing, dancing and grace before I dip the pen in ink.¹

I think Chesterton was on to something important there. It is easy to feel thankful when we are on the receiving end of a great kindness. I had a great kindness done to just over a week ago, and I’m still feeling thankful for it. But there is a reason why we call the holiday “Thanksgiving” instead of “Thanksfeeling”. Thankfulness is something too important, too essential to our human flourishing, to be confined only to those times when we “feel” thankful.

And here’s another thing I read that I’ve really been thinking about. It’s something the Presbyterian pastor John Ortberg writes in one of his books – in between commenting on Jesus’ parable of the rich fool who thinks he has earned everything he has all by himself, and the story of the healing of the ten lepers in which only one healed leper turns around to thank Jesus. This is what Ortberg writes:

Gratitude is not something we give to God because he wants to make sure we know how much trouble he went to over us. Gratitude is the gift God gives us that enables us to be blessed by all his other gifts, the way our taste buds enable us to enjoy the gift of food. Without gratitude, our lives degenerate into envy, dissatisfaction, and complaints, taking what we have for granted and always wanting more.²

And I really think Ortberg is on to something important there. That, apart from gratitude, we cannot fully enjoy the gifts of God. Without gratitude to God, we curve inward upon ourselves, instead of opening up ourselves more and more to God, and to His grace which accompanies all His gifts.

Both of these quotes, plus all of this thinking about thanksgiving, has opened up for me what Paul is after when he writes to the Colossians and to us that our lives should be “*abounding in thanksgiving.*” Look again at our text, printed in the bulletin:

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught . . .

And then, finishing the thought: “*abounding in thanksgiving.*” Paul puts thanksgiving last. In fact, it almost reads like he just randomly tossed in thanksgiving there at the end – like the important stuff in these verses is all that about walking in Jesus, rooted and built up, established in the faith just as you were taught. And then, kind of as an afterthought, “*Oh yeah, and by the way, don’t forget, also abounding in thanksgiving.*”

But I’ve come to think that to read these verses in that way is to read them precisely backwards. That “*abounding in thanksgiving*” is not just something which Paul stuck on at the end, not just something which results from walking in Christ, being built up in Him, and established in the faith – but rather is also and primarily the precondition for all of these other things to happen in us in the first place. Abounding in thanksgiving is that which opens up our hearts and minds so that we can more and more receive Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, so that more and more we are able and willing to walk in Him and not by the ways of the world. Abounding in thanksgiving so that more and more we are both rooted in Jesus and built up in Jesus, more and more established in the faith we have been taught. Thanksgiving, says Paul, is not only the result of this deeper discipleship, but also the pathway into this deeper discipleship. The more we turn to God in gratitude, the more we open ourselves up to the embrace of His grace.

And for further evidence supporting this reading of Paul’s verses, let us look at our reading from Deuteronomy 26. Israel, having been delivered by God from their slavery in Egypt, having been led and preserved through forty years of wandering in the wilderness, is now just on the verge of entering into the Promised Land and taking possession of it. And in Deuteronomy 26, God gives instructions to His people on how to live as His people in this new land, in this new situation – how to remain His faithful people once they are settled into this land overflowing with milk and honey and all manner of good things. And, from start to finish, it is an instruction to Israel to be thankful. God is telling His people Israel that if they are to prove faithful in the land He is giving them, then the key to that faithfulness is often remembering and constantly being grateful for all that God has done for them in bringing them into the land. The key for Israel’s discipleship, as for ours, is to be “*abounding in thanksgiving*”.

For the first thing that abounding in thanksgiving will provoke in the hearts and minds of the Israelites is a reminder of who they are and whose they are: “*A wandering Aramean was my father . . . and the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers . . .*” Abounding in gratitude will remind that they exist as a people only by the will of God, that they thrive only because of the grace of God, that they dwell secure only because of the providence of God. In other words, abounding in

thanksgiving reminds them continually that they are but creatures, always and in every way dependent upon their Creator for the life that they have been given.

And boy do we need that reminder, too. The great and perhaps most damaging myth of our age is that we are self-sufficient, the captains of our own destiny, the makers and masters of our own lives – which is rubbish! And I can prove it. Do this with me. Put your hand over your heart, so that you can feel it beating. You feel it? Now, tell me – how did these hearts of ours begin to beat? Did we do it? And what keeps them beating – is it our will, our conscious effort, our control? No. The beating of our hearts – this gift to us of life itself – comes to us from God our Creator.

The poet and preacher Thomas Troeger writes:

*Through our beating hearts remind us
that the source of all our powers
is, O God, your vital Spirit
that is animating ours.
Every pulse beat is revealing
while we work and while we rest
that your care for us is constant
and to live is to be blest.*

*Yet we act as if our living
were our own accomplishment
and the purpose of creation
is whatever we invent.
We ignore the truth repeated
every second by our heart:
that our thanks should be unending
for the life your life imparts.³*

By abounding in thanksgiving, Israel remembers who they are – and, even more importantly, whose they are. And so can we.

And the second thing Deuteronomy 26 tells us that abounding in thanksgiving produces in us is a deeper understanding of who God is and what God has done, and is doing, and will do for our lives: “*Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm . . . And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.*” When we are abounding in thanksgiving, we are also being drawn deeper and deeper into the knowledge of the goodness of our God, and into greater and greater adoration and praise for all the gifts of God, the grace of God which meets us at every turn.

Donald McCullough, a Presbyterian pastor, writes that he tries to begin every day with a prayer of thanksgiving – not of petitions for himself, not even of intercessions for others – but a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the grace and gifts and goodness of God towards him. He wakes

up, gets his first cup of coffee started so that he can be awake enough to be thankful, and then he starts to pray:

. . . I start by expressing gratitude as things come to mind – a good night’s sleep, my daughter calling from college the day before simply to say hi and not to ask for more money, the fact that I like my other daughter’s new husband, the view of redwoods out my window, the miracle of Mozart on the stereo, the blessedness of coffee in the morning and wine in the evening – everyday things, perhaps, but good things that ought never to be taken for granted.

I’ve noticed that when I do this an inner shift takes place: the problems that seemed so heavy, that started assaulting me in the first minutes of consciousness, suddenly seem less threatening. They’re still there, to be sure, but it’s as though my interior furniture was rearranged and the ugly sofa was taken out of the living room and stored in the basement. Everything seems brighter, too, as though a new light shines through the windows of my soul. I recall that my faith has given a name to this light – Grace – and my faith tells me it is a manifestation of divine love. As I continue my prayer, I go on to ask for help with problems, listing my worries and needs and even my selfish desires. After thanksgiving, however, I do so not in fearful desperation, but more as a child in the arms of a loving parent.⁴

Abounding in thanksgiving moves us deeper and deeper into the knowledge of the goodness of our God. Moves us deeper and deeper into the praise and adoration of God which is our rightful response to the bounty of all His goodness towards us. Moves us deeper and deeper into that peace of God which surpasses all understanding.

And last, abounding in thanksgiving to God enables us to become givers along with God. Our gratitude to God the Giver opens up in us the possibility that we should become co-givers with our Maker and Redeemer – simply by loosening our grip upon that which wrongly we deem to be “ours and ours alone”, and instead enabling us with open hands to share with others of the gifts we have received, of the bounty which through God we possess. Which is what the heart and soul of what stewardship is really all about. In gratitude to God, we give of what God has given:

And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O Lord, have given me. And you shall set it down before the Lord your God and worship before the Lord your God. And you shall rejoice in all the good that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.

Abounding in thanksgiving, we are able to become more and more like our God the Giver – generous, open-hearted and open-handed to the needs of others. Stewardship has never and should never be about church budgets – church budgets are the by-product of stewardship, never

the goal of stewardship. I mean, I like that you pay me a salary and hope you will continue to do so; I like that we get to worship in this beautiful sanctuary, and I like all the wonderful programs we enjoy – all things made possible by our stewardship. But stewardship isn't really about any of that. Stewardship is about giving back to God in gratitude a portion of what He has first given us – in order that our hearts might share with God in the extraordinary joy of giving. And in order that we should indeed learn to “*walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, just as we were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.*”

Which, of course, brings us to the commitment of our gifts, tithes, pledges, and offerings – financial and otherwise – which we make for the coming year, and which we shall do together in just a few moments. But which brings us also to one last quote concerning thanksgiving that I have been pondering over these last few weeks. It is a few verses from the brilliant seventeenth-century poet and pastor, George Herbert. But, before I read to you that quote, will you do me the favor of putting your hand over your heart again, and feel its beating – you'll hear why in just a second. Okay, here it is:

*Thou that hast given so much to me,
Give one thing more, — a grateful heart . . .
Not thankful when it pleaseth me,
As if thy blessing had spare days,
But such a heart whose pulse may be
Thy praise.⁵*

Let us, this day and always, abound in thanksgiving to God.

¹ Quoted in Michael Frost, [Seeing God in the Ordinary](#) (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), p. 53.

² John Ortberg, [When the Game Is Over It All Goes Back in the Box](#) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), p. 149.

³ Thomas H. Troeger, “Good Circulation,” in William G. Carter, ed., [Speaking of Stewardship](#) (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1998), p. 17.

⁴ Donald McCullough, [Say Please, Say Thank You](#) (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1998), pp. 21-22.

⁵ George Herbert, “Gratefulness,” in [The Complete English Works](#) (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), pp. 120-121. To read the complete poem: [George Herbert \(1593-1633\). Gratefulness. Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. 1880. Parnassus: An Anthology of Poetry \(bartleby.com\)](#) .