

## Harvest Sunday 2016

### Stepping Forward in Justice and Joy

Leviticus 19: 9-18

Matthew 6: 25-33

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

It's Harvest Sunday, and for me that translates into one of the most joyous services of our church year. It's Harvest Sunday, a day with a multitude of feelings which lead to a deep sense thanksgiving for the time Brad and I have been able to spend with you....and despite our sadness at leave-taking – and denial – (I've been very good at that!) I do so trust the future, and God's accompaniment - for all of us as we take new steps and discover new understandings of faith come alive, of joy!

But, let us not look too quickly into the future. It's Harvest Sunday when we come together as church family to realize and give thanks for our many blessings. Wondrously, this is not a time tied up in the myriad expectations and traditions we choose for ourselves during the seasons of Advent and Christmas. But like those seasons, we do love to sing our Thanksgiving hymns and make the rafters of this Meetinghouse ring!

It's Harvest Sunday, and Thanksgiving is almost upon us and with that in mind, I have a story I'd like to tell you.

One Thanksgiving season, a family was seated around their table, looking at the annual holiday bird. From the oldest to the youngest, they were to go around the table and express their thanks. When they came to the five year old, he began by looking at the turkey and expressing his thanks to the turkey saying that although he had not yet tasted it, he was sure it would be good. After that rather novel expression of thanksgiving, he began with a more predictable line of credits, thanking his mother for cooking the turkey and his father for buying the turkey, and then he went further. He joined together a whole hidden multitude of benefactors, linking them to cause and effect.

He said, "I give thanks for the checker at the grocery store who checked out the turkey. I give thanks for the grocery store people who put it on the shelf. I give thanks for the farmer that made it fat. I give thanks for the man who made the feed. I give thanks for those who brought the turkey into the store. And using his Colombo-like little mind he traced the turkey all the way from its origin to his plate. And then, in the end, he solemnly asked, "Did I leave out anybody?"

To which his three-year-old brother, embarrassed by all the proceedings, said, “God”.

And solemnly without being flustered at all, the 5 year-old said, “ I was just about to get to him.”

And if we are not careful, that same sequence may also be true for us – with all our preparations, when is it we come round to holding God in the center of our celebrations?

Looking at Thanksgiving from the secular side of things, it is a season of beauty hailed by the vibrant colors of the changing seasons. Across the countryside fields are cut, hay is bailed, and the corn brought in. The fruits of the season have been taken from the trees, filling our stores and decorating our tables. Pumpkins and gourds, cornstalks and wheat shafts adorn our doorways, and bring about a sense of bounty gathered in before the leaves have fallen and the frost comes. It is a time when we can scarcely avoid the feeling of good fortune and blessing.

Thanksgiving Day is itself a national holiday, first declared by President George Washington on November 26<sup>th</sup>, 1789 to enable our country to stop that day and offer thanks to God for our manifold blessings. But given the passage of time and the increased focus on the principle of the separation of church and state, Thanksgiving evolved – for some time – into a time to be thankful for things that went well, perhaps due to our own hard work or careful planning, another’s help, or maybe just plain luck.

But from the perspective of faith, harvest time calls us to offer our thanks to God, the author of all good things. When we can realize blessing, rather than simple good fortune, thanksgiving gains a new focus. It shifts into gratefulness to the One who chooses to do things with us in mind, who blesses us with the gifts of creation, and who also walks with us and loves us through the mishaps that also befall.

In no way do I mean to suggest that God intends hurt or punishment for any of God’s children. Rather there is a potential for blessing in all that happens. However, to see blessing in all that happens is a stretch, for there are events which we wish – with everything in us – had never taken place – in our own lives, across this country and across the globe. But even there blessing can be found in our human response to discovered hurt or need.

Such was the cast with the murders in Charleston, South Carolina on July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015 when nine attendees at a bible study were shot because of their skin color, according to the shooter. After that tragedy, the church could have closed its doors, or cut back on public events. Instead, Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, the oldest black church in the south flung open its doors and welcomed people. The church turned to scripture quoting, “Let all that you do be done in love.”

This year on the anniversary of the massacre, not only was the tragedy remembered, but the forgiveness of its members, as they flung open their doors once more, and events there and throughout the city of Charleston were held in memory of the victims., including an ecumenical service at the TD arena in the city. What could have shut people down, was transformed into a flagrant and faithful living out of faith, welcoming all who would come. Inspiring all who would come – then – and perhaps even in our thoughts and prayers this day.

In a less public forum, blessing can also be found in the simple yet oh so difficult accompaniment of a loving friend with a friend or family member going through a time of real need. These situations and many more terribly challenging situations can, with God’s help, bring forth blessing.

Now let us move beyond our experiences and understandings of thanksgiving and look back to the teachings of the Hebrew scriptures, as Beth read for us this morning.

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard, you shall leave them for the poor and the alien.”

Inherent in the process for the harvest we find an element of justice with the command to leave part of the harvest available for whomever would come. Concerns for the poor and the alien – dare I say immigrant according to Jewish law mattered greatly. Care for the poor and the alien, concerns then – and now, as we speak.

And the list of commands extended, you shall not defraud your neighbor. You shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning... concluding with the old testament, the Hebrew scriptures ( not just the New Testament )commanding you shall love your neighbor as yourself. At harvest time, not only were people to leave part of their bounty for the poor, their personal actions and intentions were also directed toward kindness and justice for all.

The joy and celebration of the harvest was tied to justice and the love of neighbor. In Judaism, in Christianity, and in Islam. For even in the Quran, we find the command to “Serve God...and do good, to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, those in need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your side, and the wayfarer ye meet. “

All three Abrahamic faiths tie bounty with responsibility for all people. Friends these are the things that make for peace.

In the second scripture this morning from Matthew, taken from his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus takes another step in regard to our riches and our bounty. He calls us

from any worry or defensiveness, from the need to protect our bounty, to the real freedom of seeking first the Kingdom of God.

“Do not worry about your life,” he says, “what you shall eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is life not more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, they neither sew nor reap, nor gather into barns, and yet your Heavenly Father feeds them. ...And if God clothes the grass of the field which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you...you of little faith? THEREFORE, DO NOT WORRY. Saying what will we eat, or what shall we wear. (and how many times will we ask just those questions this week? But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Can we do that? We pray “Thy kingdom come on earth...as it is in heaven.

And this can begin

when we do not hoard, but leave a portion of our bounty for others.

When we do not build up walls, but build bridges reaching out to others.

When we stop acting out of fear, but trust God’s loving presence to bring us into each new day.

Then we will know God’s blessings as we have not before.

Currently, we are living in a time where we meet challenges, where we meet change. We live in a time where our values are being questioned, and the future is unclear. But we need not do so passively. Today I would pray for all of us that we might go forward loving God and neighbor, even loving ourselves, and trusting God to be with us. For with God, all things are possible, with God we need not fear. Amen.