

The Church of the Pilgrimage
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Deuteronomy 8:7-18

For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land—a land with brooks, streams, and deep springs gushing out into the valleys and hills; a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills. When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. He led you through the vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. He gave you manna to eat in the wilderness, something your ancestors had never known, to humble and test you so that in the end it might go well with you. You may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today.

Memory Jog

When my kids were young, still under the roof as we say, I made it a practice to pay them, yes, pay them a dollar whenever I mentioned them by name in a sermon – a way to make me think twice about talking about my kids too much. This practice was not extended to my husband, though I try to watch it in mentioning him a lot. Daughter Amy, the materialist of the children, soon pointed out that what could a dollar get you anymore? The going rate should be five dollars! -- which it was for a few of her high school years. And no, Amy, up there in Montreal – I am not sending you five dollars for this morning when I have mentioned you by name. You are in *college*, my dear.

I bring this up because I am beginning to feel I should be paying my father, that I should carry a five spot in my pocket whenever I go to Brookdale, the assisted living facility where he resides. I mention him a lot in sermons, I do know this...because along with being a pastor and a wife these days being a daughter who shows up is pretty high up there on the list of what I give my time to. He, my father, is definitely part of the regular day in and day out rhythm of my life.

And this week we had a great visit, made different, improved upon by the fact that I finally unpacked a box of memorabilia my cousin had brought to me from the farm in Southern Ontario where my dad grew up. So, in I went with a bag of items: a booklet he had made for collecting stamps. A high school track number, the number printed on a fabric square, complete with old safety pins. A pay stub from the

university in his research days for a monthly salary of one hundred dollars. There were photos of him and of friends, fellow graduates, and some later in life newspaper articles accounting for various business ventures.

My Dad—struggling now with a disease that hampers his memory—looked at each thing one by one with a warm and tender smile holding his track letter up to his chest, musing over the notes, letters, and newspaper articles for to him this all was truly attic treasure. And here's the thing: My Dad *remembered* so much. He remembered the names of people in the photos. If someone signed their name Bob, he'd say "Oh, that's Bob Price." In a group photo he pointed to a young woman, recalling both her name and her red hair. "I was kind of sweet on her" he said.

It was great fun, and it brought us both joy for him to remember like this. "I had a good growing up" he said in summation. When I got up to leave he looked at me and said "That was a great effort on your part." Always the affirming father. The visit felt like a small victory. In a mind tangled and confused, his memory had been good and strong at least for one afternoon visit.

Our scripture today asks a critical question, a question having to do with memory. The people stand on the verge of crossing over to the promised land. When they get there, and when they settle in, will they remember? Will they remember the one who brought them out of Egypt, who delivered them from slavery? Will they remember who led them by cloud by day and by fire pillar by night, who fed them with manna in the wilderness as they journeyed through? Moses is speaking here, and he warns the people that success in Canaan will tempt them to forget their complete dependence upon God's mercies. "Take heed lest you forget the Lord your God..." Moses says. "Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.'" (v. 17)

Take heed. *Heed* speaks of danger. Things will not go so well for you if you forget, Moses says. If you forget how you got here, who it is that brought this about your individual life, and your common life will suffer. You will be more inclined to go after idols, idols being anything that grabs our attention, our devotion, more than God. You will be more inclined to lead an aimless life, one devoted to chasing after things, attempting to secure your own life, rather than staying rooted and grounded in God.

And here's the thing: God isn't getting the people to the promised land because they've been oh so awesome, oh so faithful and good. If they are to *truly remember* they will call to mind not only the tough conditions of the wilderness years, but also their own the grumbling, the questioning of God and God's goodness when times were tough, the way they prodded Aaron to make that golden calf, the way they bowed before it. No, they are being guided to the promised land because of *God's* goodness, not their own. But once they are in, once they've arrived, the people will be inclined to forget this – so warns Moses.

We humans tend to think in terms of punishment and reward. When it is tough, we think God has it in for us, or has forgotten us. When it is better, it creeps in: we think maybe God is rewarding us because we are so swell, the next step being we think we got where we are all by ourselves.

So at a critical juncture, before the people take a first step in the promised land, Moses wants the people to remember: God has been with them -- with them thick or thin. Up and down and sideways. This passage is really Moses attempt to jog the people's memory. In the wilderness, Moses says, God cared for you *daily*. Remember this.

Last Tuesday night we had a council meeting. We knew there was a lot on the agenda...it could be a long meeting. But before we began, I asked people to offer up things they feel thankful for. It's not the way we begin every meeting, though perhaps we should, and you could see it took a few folks by surprise. They just expected me to say an opening prayer, so we could get on with our agenda. But this pause, I think it helped us. I think it helped put a check on the urgency we feel about so many things. I think were we to do that more, that is, pause and give thanks, we might find our hearts set in a direction that feels more thoughtful, and more inclined to patience and prayer (the things that help us in the long haul) rather than our having the overly quick response to those things which are trying, difficult, or challenging – like our ongoing parking problems.

Friends, practicing gratitude can change us. And really, I am *preaching to myself* here today. This week –maybe I was tired or something – maybe I got a big dump of holiday stress early this year --but I got all wrought up about ever changing family plans as to who was actually coming for Thanksgiving and when they were going to show up and take off as if knowing how many plates to put around the table this coming Thursday was the biggest deal, the MOST IMPORTANT THING in my life. Talk about loss of perspective. I had that kind of quick response thing going, a little hot under the collar. Truth is, I was wasting a lot of energy being angry about things that were not under my control. And it was not a great place to be. You can ask that husband of mine, who I will not name, because I might have to pay him five dollars.

Where am I going with this? That there is a tie between humility and remembering to give thanks. If we stay humble, we don't think we've gotten where we are completely by our own talent and charm and competence. If we stay humble, we don't try to control everything. And if we stay humble, I think we are generally less hard on others who may not be doing things the way we'd like them to do things.

This week on NPR I heard Terry Gross interviewing Father Greg Boyle, a catholic priest who is founder and directory of Homeboy Industries, a ministry that works with gang members in Los Angeles. Father Boyle spoke of encountering another with humility, because you don't know what their life experience has been, and more good will come out of *listening* than proscribing for another person how they should be living their life. There is a tie between being humble, which is to say

having an appropriate understanding of your place in the universe, and the capacity for gratitude. It's like a prerequisite for true thanksgiving might be this realization: We are all of us just another human being, another beautiful but often wayward child of God.

But, now, as your preacher standing here today in her fine Pilgrim dress, I am aware we have yet to focus our attention on the first Thanksgiving. Our harvest table is meant to help us remember— and I want to take a moment to thank Susan Cotta and Cynthia Marks for working together to make this artful table happen. We have often had a beautiful cornucopia, a reminder of the bounty of the harvest. But this year there are some new things here, elements that had not been remembered before. A lobster, and clamshells -- to remind us of the sea and its bounty and maybe too of our need to care for the earth. A native American dreamcatcher, and a corn doll, a gift to one of our younger church members from her Native American stepfather. In these elements, we are reminded that the first Thanksgiving was a cooperative event: Pilgrim settlers and Native Americans coming together.

I am sure I am not the only one here with memories of a New England thanksgiving that included the children dressing up with the paper bag pilgrim outfits for Pilgrims and feathered headbands for the Native Americans. In those days, I didn't think much about the history element. It was a big meal, and we were gathered with friends and family. Then, later, I am pretty sure I imagined the Pilgrims sharing a meal with the Native Americans (we said Indians then) a kind of hybrid potluck, with English specialties on china and maybe even a white linen table cloth and then some local fish and fowl and those five deer contributed by the native folks to help round things out. Massasoit, would you please pass the relish tray? In other words, I thought of the Pilgrims first, and the Native Americans later.

But the truth is, what we all know is that during that first cold winter, the Native Americans helped keep the Pilgrims from starving. For the Pilgrims, this Thanksgiving meal was remembrance of God being with them in their journey across the sea, yes, but much more so it was God being with them in that first hard year, which included this growing relationship with native Americans. As they feasted, sharing wild turkey and deer and fish together, (eating with their *hands* and not with forks by the way) the occasion of this First Thanksgiving was likely for them a memory jog, a concrete reinforcement of how interdependent we human beings are. May it be for us as well, a reminder of how much better things go when we live in deep awareness of this reality – when we focus on cooperation rather than dominance or control.

So how do we live in gratitude all our days? It isn't a bad idea to make a list. Howard Thurman, the great African American theologian, did just that. He sat down one year and wrote an annual review, naming the things he was most thankful for – a reading we've often used in our interfaith thanksgiving services. Some people have had success is singing the doxology all week long. Sing it when you walk, before you go to bed, when you wake up. See if that doesn't help set your heart in a more

grateful direction. If you eat a meal as a family, go around the table, take time before eating to share one good thing about your day. If you are a very visual person, you might find a table or bureau top and make a kind of gratitude center, placing objects that remind you of all that is good.

On top of such intentional practices, our scripture today suggests a needed theology. As we grow as persons of faith, a mental adjustment may be necessary. We need to move beyond thinking of God as our fixer, the one who we appeal to when we need something the one who helps us in times of trouble, and the one who will get us the goods and think of God more as our ground of being, a loving, faithful, persistent presence one who companions us, loves us and feeds us in all seasons, in good times and bad.

May we each of us grow in our relationship with God and with one another.
May we be people who remember and give thanks.

Amen.