

Living the Given Life

Psalm 107: 1-9; Matthew 6:9-13

Twentieth-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, (Nov. 21) 2021

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*Ancient religion and modern science agree: We are here to give praise. Or, to slightly tip the expression, to pay attention.*

- John Updike

*We live the given life, and not the planned.*

- Wendell Berry

We start learning to say thank you very early. Over and over, we hear parents speaking to their children, “What do you say?” “Say ‘thank you.’” And over and over we hear children mumble something, until they get the hang of it, and learn how to say it. Most likely, we were taught the same way by our parents.

It’s not always easy to say thank you. Sometimes as a child we’re so taken with the gift that we forget to be grateful. Sometimes we’re so quick to want to play with the gift that we rush off before saying “thank you.” Worst is when we think we had it coming in the first place. We expected it. Plus, it so difficult to be thankful and say “thank you” when we wanted one thing and received another. That was hard. Saying “thank you” for a pair of socks was a challenge when you had your eye set on a new baseball glove.

But nevertheless, we were taught to say “thank you.” We learned that it wasn’t about us. The whole notion of being thankful was to take our focus away from ourselves and bestow grace back upon the giver. That’s hard for a child to learn, and it’s still hard. Furthermore, it’s hard in this old world we’re living in.

One of my favorite movies is the 1965 Jimmy Stewart film, *Shenandoah*, set during the Civil War in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Jimmy Stewart is a proud and good man, a successful farmer and patriarch of six sons, who does everything he can to stay out of the war which is getting closer and closer. He’s independent as illustrated by his table blessing said at the beginning of the movie: *Lord, we cleared this land. We plowed it, sowed it, and harvested it. We cooked the harvest. It wouldn't be here and we wouldn't be eating it if we hadn't done it all ourselves. We worked dog-bone hard for every crumb and morsel, but we thank you Lord just the same for the food we're about to eat. Amen.*

The rest of the movie is the Jimmy Stewart character, Charlie Anderson, learning through grief and humility that we are connected to the wider world and that life is a precious gift.

One of my favorite lines from Wendell Berry gives us our title this morning when he says, “We live the given life, and not the planned.” He also remembers sitting on the porch with his well over eighty-year old father, when out of the blue, his father said, “Well, I have lived a wonderful life,” and after a long pause, “and I have had nothing to do with it.”

We live the given life. It is a gift. It's all grace. And we respond to the gift with gratitude. We learn to say "thank you."

Jesus lived and taught that his entire life was a life of gratitude and giving thanks to God. His entire ministry was an embodiment of receiving and giving. From what we read in the gospels, every day Jesus began the morning in prayer with God. Every morning he spent time with God, receiving and being nourished and being renewed. And the rest of the day, Jesus went about serving others healing and teaching and giving and giving. He gave and gave until he gave his very life. Even when he was facing the religious authorities, he prayed, "I thank thee Father, Lord of heaven and earth that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes"(Luke 10:31). Around the Table, when he gathered there on the night he was betrayed, the Scriptures said that after he had given thanks, he took the bread, broke it, and shared with the others.

This morning I want us to remember that we live the given life. It's all a gift. That in Christ Jesus, God comes to us, has taken the initiative. Many people think that the Christian faith is that we must repent first, we must get our life straightened out and turn from our selfish ways and come to God, first. Then as a result God saves us. Not true. In Christ, God graciously comes to us first, and it is only by the grace of God that we can know God, in the first place, and because of God's grace are we able to be transformed. We live the given life.

In our Scripture lesson today, the disciples ask Jesus how to pray. They've

been watching him pray so now they ask him to teach them. So Jesus gives them what we now call “the Lord’s Prayer.” Right up front, the grace of God frames everything else said. “Give us this day our daily bread,” is a reminder that our daily sustenance comes as a gift. It is not ours; we didn’t manage it, create it, make it, or control it. It is given. This prayer is Jesus’s way of “saying grace,” giving thanks, to return thanks, as folks used to say.

When I was a boy, the earliest training in prayer came in two places: bedtime prayers and saying grace at the dinner table. Teaching children these prayers is our earliest training in receiving the grace and gifts of God, that life is given and not taken or controlled. Saying grace directs our posture – we bow our heads and clasp our hands. It defines and directs us to God and defines and directs our eating toward God.

This Thursday, when we celebrate Thanksgiving, will how we eat and what we eat honor God? Will it honor God’s creatures who planted the food, raised it, harvested it, transported it, and prepared it? Will it honor God’s creatures who were sacrificed for us?

When we don’t give thanks, we are not directing ourselves and our food to God. Considering how we often eat, this is not surprising. Rather than receiving gifts, we are consuming products. Products which we have no sense of where they came from, who grew them, how the growers were treated and paid, how the product was transported or processed, how far it came, what is in it, and so on and so on. No wonder we do not thank God for such food.

My friend, Norman Wirzba, who teaches at Duke Divinity School, asks the question if we have ever noticed the close etymological kinship of “thinking” and “thanking?” Only one letter makes the words different. In some traditional societies the two words are related to each other. The Old English word for “thought” was *thanc* which referred to the innermost person’s heart that is always reaching out to connect with the wider world. True thought is always this heartfelt connection that joins us to others and to the world. To think is to pay attention, to stop, to slow down, to take the time to notice our connection. Thinking leads to thanking and connecting. We slow down and notice the food we are about to eat and give thanks.

John Updike said, “Ancient religion and modern science agree: We are here to give praise. Or, to slightly tip the expression, to pay attention.”

Pay attention, notice, think. We stop and realize that we are not on our own, isolated, autonomous individuals. As Wendell Berry says, “There is, in practice, no such thing as autonomy. Practically, there is only a distinction between responsible and irresponsible dependence.”

In *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* Barbara Kingsolver writes about preparing a major feast for a big birthday bash. Her family is committed to growing their own food or buying it locally, so there is no running down to the closest Wal-Mart to buy stuff. She writes about going out to the garden to harvest carrots and then she pauses, pays attention, and thinks about what she is doing. “I stood for a minute

clutching my carrots, looking out over our pasture to Walker Mountain on the horizon. The view from our garden is spectacular. I thought about people I knew who right at that moment might be plucking chickens, picking strawberries and lettuce, just for us. I felt grateful to the people involved, and the animals also... I sent my thanks across the country, like any sensible person saying grace before a meal” (p. 105).

If thinking and thanking are so close, then perhaps un-thinking might very well be connected to being un-thankful. Stupidity, not having to do with intelligence and certainly not with education, but stupidity as self-absorbed leads to being ungrateful. Ignorance leads to ingratitude, and ingratitude leads to destruction of relationships, community, and the wider world. We don't know and we don't care. We end up thinking only of ourselves. We build walls. We hunker down inside of our own enclaves. We let our fears dominate and the next thing we know, we're all carrying guns ready for battle. And when we start carrying guns, everyone becomes a potential target.

Therefore, giving thanks is more than a pious or sentimental gesture. Rather, it is an act of political and revolutionary significance. It is why tyrants have considered Jesus' Lord's Prayer as a threat. Praying for God's kingdom to come, giving thanks for God's daily bread is a threat to those who want us to believe that everything comes from them.

Thinking and thanking reorients us to look outward, not focus upon ourselves. We think of God and of others who give us our lives and with whom we

are connected. Instead of hunkering down defensively, we look outward at our connections with others, and we mend and repair the broken connections of this world.

The parable of the One Lost Sheep in Matthew 18 comes to mind. Remember that the good shepherd had a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, Jesus asks, “Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine, and go look for the one that was lost? And if he finds it, doesn’t he rejoice more of that one sheep than the ninety-nine who did not get lost?”

Part of what Jesus is saying to us, is that a good shepherd is mindful of what being lost is like. The good shepherd has an empathetic mind, not an efficient one, and not an economic one. The good shepherd is thinking about what it is like to be lost and his or her responsibility to find the lost sheep and returning it to wholeness. That is who God is – the good shepherd, who is thinking of the lost, the left-out, the cast-off, the cast-out, the run-off, and the run-out and God is out looking for them and bringing them in.

When we think and thank, when we say grace, we become empathetic participants in God’s good creation and the wonderful life God has given us. Saying thank you becomes a subversive act which commits us to the shalom, the wholeness of God’s creation.

Grace is the heart of all creation. God gives, God creates, therefore, saying grace becomes a sacrament, a means of participating in God and in the grace of

God. This is a true “Eucharist” – a true thanksgiving, which is what Eucharist means. Our shared life, the life we all have together, is a great thanksgiving.

This is true of food and table, which we say grace over, and it is true of our life together in Christ. And from the life we share together in Christ we begin to see the ripple effects of sharing, relationships, and community building beyond ourselves into the wider world. The shared life becomes a true great thanksgiving. When we give thanks we are joining God’s great movement of the entire universe.

Wendell Berry’s character Jayber Crow says, “I have got to the age now where I can see how short a time we have to be here. And when I think about it, it can seem strange beyond telling that this particular bunch of us should be here on this little patch of ground in this little patch of time, and I can think of the other times and places I might have lived, the other kinds of man I might have been. But there is something else. There are moments when the heart is generous, and then it knows that for better or worse our lives are woven together here, one with one another and with the place and all living things” (*Jayber Crow*, p. 210).

God has given us so much to say grace over. Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,  
Mother of us all. Amen.