

Sermon, Williamsburg Presbyterian Church, February, 2010

Deuteronomy 26:1-11.

Also Psalm 91; and Romans 10:10-13

By Louis Weeks

God's Grace—Our Gratitude

Here is the central truth about the Lord's Supper.

God gives us food and drink, nourishment. A bountiful life.

We acknowledge our gratefulness and eat and drink spiritually of Jesus Christ.

We are nourished to become more mature disciples, therefore more grateful for God's bounty.

These little portions we take today probably do not conjure bounty. So imagine a table of bread and wine and other foods. Some Presbyterians in Indonesia, I am told, put out all kinds of fruit and vegetables and bowls of rice on the communion table to symbolize this bounty.

Here is the central truth about all our lives. About the whole creation, according to a Reformed Christian perspective—God gives freely for creation, for life, for sustenance, for joy, for hope, for love. Even faith itself is God's gift, not something we conjure or possess to give to God. We believe this. We find it declared in the Bible. We savor it in our souls.

And we are grateful. We join the rest of creation in singing God's praise.

On this beautiful day, early in the morning as we walked, we could hear the birds sing in gratitude. The hills rejoice. Flatlands, too? As its best, the whole creation joyfully obeys God's direction and yields to God's plan.

And human beings are grateful. At our best we praise God joyfully and live in eager expectation that God's faithfulness will never cease.

Preaching in a Presbyterian congregation in Northern Virginia some years ago, I was told that I must meet a certain woman. "She is a gift to all of us," one of the

elders told me. My host family told me about her life, her leadership in the church, her disability, and her ministry. The couple took me by her house after church.

There she was, propped up in a hospital bed in what had been her modest living room. She apologized for not being dressed properly, for not having her face on, for not being able to come to church, and then with prompting told me of her “card ministry.” She sent cards to everyone—mostly to members of the congregation and visitors. Kids graduating, many on their birthdays and anniversaries, visitors telling them to come back to church. A joyful woman.

“This is how I praise God,” she told me. “God fills my life with gifts. I am so grateful.”

It’s been my privilege to see grateful Christians in many parts of the country, in many parts of the world. And I experience Williamsburg Presbyterians comprising a grateful congregation, gathered for praise of God.

Deuteronomy 26 tells the faithful how to praise God as the crops come in. Remember God gave you the land and the fruitful harvest. Here’s what you say, according to Moses, in light of all these gifts.

A wandering Aramean was my ancestor, and he went down to Egypt—that’s Jesse and all his sons including Joseph, and their families. We were aliens there. We were few, then we grew. Egyptians oppressed us, made us like slaves. God heard our cry. God liberated us. God gave us all this—a land flowing with milk and honey. We are no longer aliens here. So we give back first fruits.

Remember these are people in subsistence farming. The bounty is seasonal. Most are not wealthy. Various foods are available only in season.

God says, “You give back to God the first fruits of all you have received:” You put the basket in front of the place God tells you. Then have a celebration with all the bounty God gives you. And don’t forget to include the aliens—that’s their codeword for immigrants—the poor and vulnerable people. (We still use it, don’t we speaking of “aliens and resident aliens.”)

We respond to God’s grace with our gratitude. And we celebrate God’s bounty. At our best we share our bounty with the poor, the vulnerable, and the immigrants among us.

Or look at our Psalm for today—Psalm 91. God gives refuge for us. God is our fortress. God bears us up in grace when ills befall us. Angels care for us. So we are grateful. We praise God. We sing this psalm—this hymn.

Romans 10? Paul gives these young Christians assurance. If you confess with your lips and believe in your heart that God gave the gift of Jesus Christ and he died and rose, you will be saved. He quotes Isaiah, “No one who believes in God will be put to shame.”

These are all God’s free gifts of grace—belief, salvation, faith. Rejoice, be grateful.

For Presbyterians reading God’s Word, these themes are pervasive: God’s grace, our gratitude.

As we hear the gospel, God loved the world so much. Jesus died for your sins. God raised Jesus Christ, first fruits of a resurrection of believers and the redeeming of the whole creation.

The Holy Spirit is at work among you, quickening faith and providing you with all you need to proclaim God’s praise and to serve.

Cases can be made for other central themes of our Reformed and Presbyterian faith.

We may be said to concentrate on God’s Godness, (Sovereignty). We may be found to focus on our sinfulness (Depravity) more than on human potential. And we believe strongly in the work of Jesus in Atonement for believers. Some still see Calvinism primarily that way.

Some may see us concentrating on the predestination of the saints, or our responsible vocation, or the way many of us exercise a this-worldly asceticism, a shunning of fancy living.

But many of us who study Presbyterians see Grace and Gratitude right at the core of our faith. It may be there for other streams of Christianity, but certainly there for us.

And we know individually of God’s grace and our responses, do we not? We look—most frequently we look over our shoulder, at our past—and we see God’s

bountiful care for us. How God lifted us from depression, from selfishness, from petty concerns. From danger. From illness, from fear of death.

Today in worship in light of this text from Deuteronomy, we ask, “So what is our story of God’s grace and our gratitude collectively in this congregation?” This Williamsburg Presbyterian congregation and the Presbyterians around us.

Here is the earliest reference I can find—Presbyterians preaching and teaching here and near here.

Synod of New York, Meeting September 19, 1745.

Ordered that Mess. Gilbert Tennent, Samuel Blair, and Ebenezer Pemberton, do draw up a testimony to the work of God’s glorious grace, -- God’s grace—right there in the minutes of the synod—God’s grace which has been carried on in these parts of the land (that is in Virginia) and bring it to Synod. The wide door that is open for the preaching of the gospel in those parts (Virginia), and the hopeful prospect for success. (Briggs, 296)

Williamsburg Presbyterian Church began with a testimony to God’s grace. Dissenters from the Church of England wanting to worship God, baptize their children, hear good preaching, and grow in nurture in ways different from the established church in the colony of Virginia. These were doubtless people of commerce and their households. Doubtless educated and assertive people at the heart of the request, for the governor granted it.

So at least by the 1760s Presbyterians gathered and worshiped together here in Williamsburg. It would not have been difficult to organize a church then, for extended households of Reformed Christians generally gathered regularly to read scripture and pray. All it took was three households, and there you had the three elders necessary. And they evidently received good preaching, at least from time to time as ministers were charged with visiting.

Most Presbyterians in the Williamsburg area probably sided with the American Revolutionaries, but some were certainly loyalists and others on the fence when the American Revolution came to pass.

We Presbyterians kept gathering in clusters of extended families in and around the tiny town of Williamsburg through the ante-bellum decades, and we may have been organized but we do not have records from those times.

No doubt Williamsburg Presbyterian allegiances differed and contrasted during the years of the Civil War. (When have we all ever agreed on anything?)

Wilford Cale, who graciously shared his notes on the history of our congregation, was amused that during the war, some Confederate Presbyterians referred to “our army.” Of course that’s before the “Great Migration From The North,” from Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, where most of our members seem to come. But even then, I’ll bet some Union sympathizers gritted their teeth or retorted “Our army is True Blue, like the Presbyterian symbol.”

Following the war, as we organized more thoroughly, our congregation was meeting in two locations. In the 1920s we enjoyed revivals here. One is noted as 10 days of revival services and gained 10 new members—8 on profession of faith and 2 by transfer of letter.

In the 1930s we gave up one building and sold another to move to this present location. We had already been serving formally in a subsidized campus ministry with William and Mary students for at least a decade and we were glad to be closer to campus.

We were few, as few as a hundred members only three generations ago. 135 members in 1936.

We grew in that 1950s and 1960s time of growth in the area—after World War II, by 1983 there were 836 members. 1148 by 1991.

Capable ministers, scores of good elders and other lay leaders selflessly responding to God’s gifts through the years. New property next door to our church, a new fellowship hall and classrooms, new sanctuary.

And we have been celebrating the bounty through the years—with family night dinners and Kirk nights and women’s and men’s breakfasts and lunches and Shrove Pancake dinners.

And we have been engaged in mission among people in Williamsburg and through the region—including the aliens if you will. World mission throughout our history.

What was called domestic mission, then home mission, in other parts of the state and country. Members of this church have gone to serve, and others have given of time and money to make that possible.

And here we gather—enjoy a bounty of tradition and heritage, buildings and mission opportunities supplied by others before us. And here we are grateful, express our gratefulness in so many ways—giving for Souper Bowl, FISH, Grove, Transitional housing, jail ministries, chaplaincy among the armed forces, mission trips, choirs singing, congregation singing – on key. Nurture one another, help the sick, welcome the stranger. We’re doing what Moses said God said for us to do.

A couple of weeks ago some of us from here joined King’s Grant Presbyterian Church members in Virginia Beach as more than six hundred people packaged meals for people in Haiti. An aged blind lady, scouts in their uniforms, little kids, folk with walkers, and grown ups of every hue and body type together—measurers of rice, and dried protein, adders of vitamins, loaders of packages in trucks—making thousands of meals for those in need.

We will have the same opportunity here soon, March 20 in our own fellowship hall. Money to support that is what the envelopes are for.

Gratefully responding to God’s grace—so freely given. Let us now turn to our celebration of the Lord’s Supper, gratefully.

And when we go home, let us celebrate joyfully God’s bounty, with all our household, and with those who in this place are aliens and immigrants, and the poor more generally.

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General indebtedness to B. A. Gerrish, **Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin**. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993

Also

Charles A. Briggs, **American Presbyterianism: Its Origins and Early History**. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1885