

Attitude of Gratitude,

Year B, Thanksgiving

October 11, 2009

St. Paul's United Church, Richmond, ON

Thanksgiving Sunday

Psalms 126

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

Joel 2:21-27

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

Matthew 6:25-33

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

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The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson

We have dressed the church this morning to remind us of the beauty of the earth, life that is given by soil and care. We dress up to remind ourselves of what is important. When we go out for a special occasion our clothes reflect the meaning of the event.

Our texts reflect giving thanks and rejoicing. I especially like the passage from the prophet Joel. He writes after a period of difficulty and stress. His sense of well-being and thanksgiving is so great that he includes the soil and the animals as well as human beings in the rejoicing. It resonates for us, I think, living as we do where Autumn just bursts with exuberant colour and richness. We can say with Joel that in our coloured leaves and vivid blue skies all of creation gives joyful thanks to the Creator.

Joel has a 'whole earth' view of God's care. God is intimately involved with all of creation - with plants and animals, even the rocky substance of the planet itself. God is connected, related to the whole world. And all are called to give thanks to God and rejoice in God's graciousness and bounty.

Jesus doubtless has these images in mind in this saying recorded in Matthew's gospel. His reference to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field are images embedded in our collective memory. They conjure up phrases from the Old Testament, words that assure us that God's care for all creatures including ourselves, still continues.

Jesus, however, is different. He makes his statement during a time of extreme difficulty. He tells people not to worry at a time when there is plenty to worry about. And that worry is called the Roman Empire.

When Jesus uses the phrase "kingdom of God," a phrase which is central to his theology and which he uses all the time, he's not just making a nice poetic allusion. He's making a political statement, and a challenging one at that. When Jesus uses Kingdom of God, he is always contrasting it with the kingdom everyone experiences everyday - the Empire of Rome.

Living in the kingdom of Rome was no picnic. The Roman Legion was everywhere and, by law, could force you to carry their packs. You could be conscripted to work on building projects - amphitheaters or roads without compensation. They could take a portion of your crops and tax you to the point of destitution. In fact, most people in the Roman Empire - probably 80 to 90% were one meal away from starvation.

It is in this context that Jesus uses the phrase "Kingdom of God". Jesus explicitly contrasts God's empire with the Empire of Rome. The Empire of Rome is based on an economy of scarcity, exclusion and coercion. The Empire of God, on the other hand, is based on abundance, inclusion and boundless, persuasive love. Jesus constantly invites his hearers to live in God's kingdom - and not just in some distant future, in an afterlife, or some kind of heaven - but in the here and now. Jesus claims that God's kingdom is present in everyday reality. He invites people to participate in that reality, to live in God's kingdom, right now. He invites us to live in God's realm of abundance and joy and by so doing make it actual in our ordinary world.

You can imagine the reaction this would have had in early Jesus' communities in the Roman Empire. In a world where nearly everyone was starving, the followers of Jesus shared what they had with each other and lived out of an attitude of gratitude and hospitality. In a world where everyone was worried about the future, about the authorities, about being swept up in the next purge, Jesus' followers were instructed to live without worries about the precariousness of their situation. While life in the Roman Empire led one to be suspicious and fearful of everyone outside one's own immediate circle, Jesus' followers were instructed to be open and accepting of others, to care for them and, in fact, to love them.

Like Jesus himself, Jesus' followers stuck out in the Roman Empire because they did not let the worries of daily life, or the agenda of Rome determine their behaviour or how they would live. Their behaviour and living was in response to the lure of God and God's realm of peace, justice and beauty. They lived an attitude of gratitude; giving thanks for the life and beauty that surrounded them.

I think this is the power of these images Jesus used. They turned around those who had no hope into those who affirmed life. Those without community created communities of support. They healed the sick, fed one another and, despite the darkness of the empire, became a beacon of light that we still feel today.

The images dealt with attitudes. The power of an attitude to guide us. Think of not to worry for tomorrow for today has enough of its own worries. Common sense that we ought to deal with what is in front of us rather than to given to excessive worry about the future. If we take care of today's issues the future is taken care of. Note how the war on terror actually has created more terror. What motivated was not how do we bring all to the table but to break the world into them - demons and us. Excessive fear can lead to fortress mentality. Fear creates fear.

Thanksgiving is an attitude toward life where the truth about reality is, despite the negativity we experience, love is real. Goodness and beauty do really underpin our experience.

Alanis Morissette's song "Thank U" speaks to our situation:

Thank you India
Thank you terror
Thank you disillusionment
Thank you frailty

Thank you consequence
Thank you thank you silence

I like that there are negative things in her list. Its about having an attitude of gratitude which cannot be deterred by negative circumstances. We, like them, are called to live out of the abundance and security of God's kingdom.

We can be continually thankful because we know the deep truth about reality is that love is real. We are called to live a life of beauty, generosity and inclusion so as to make God's kingdom a reality in our everyday life. Goodness and beauty underpin and support our lives. By living out of thanksgiving, generosity and beauty we transform our world into God's realm, God's shalom, God's paradise.

In times of stress and distress we need to sing again. To find that basic drive where we are in harmony with God who is in harmony with all of reality. To let that feeling of God fill us, lift us, direct us so we are the people who go out singing Amen. And to know that such singing is for the betterment of world. To know that paradise is real and it is here - Amen.

George Hermanson
www.georgehermanson.com