Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Thanksgiving Sunday

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

November 19, 2017

Neal MacPherson

THANKSGIVING HONESTY Deuteronomy 8:7–18

Matthew 25:14–30

In 1927, when he was the young pastor of Detroit’s Bethel

Evangelical Church, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wondered whether or not in an industrial civilization a genuine spirit of thanksgiving was really possible. He noted that in an industrial age human beings are more and more separated from the natural order of things and also the precarious forces of nature, all of which in the past have contributed to a genuine spirit of thankfulness when a harvest turned out to be bountiful. He said that because human beings had become so skilled at producing things themselves without any reference to the natural world that Thanksgiving had become “increasingly the business of congratulating the Almighty upon his most excellent co-workers, ourselves.”[[1]](#footnote-1) When I recall Niebuhr’s words, I think of the late Steve Jobs, the creative force behind Apple, and how when he wanted to impress the public with a new product he would walk on the stage alone, in front of a huge screen, and before an expectant audience pull from his jeans pocket the latest version of the I Phone or I Touch to the applause of everyone. No one would have thought to bring any reference to the natural world or a spirit of gratitude, for that matter, into the picture.

Reinhold Niebuhr was right. Niebuhr, by the way, went on to describe a Thanksgiving Service he had attended, which he described as being filled with a kind of “self-righteous bunk” which made it “quite impossible” for him to worship. He noted the absence of any genuine spirit of confession that would make a Thanksgiving Service real.

Now, I hope that Reinhold Niebuhr would feel more at home in this service, but that is not for me to say. I think we know in our hearts that Thanksgiving surely cannot be a time for self-congratulation, an occasion for us to take pride in how much we have or have accomplished, but instead must be a time in which we acknowledge how much we really do depend upon the grace and generosity of God and how we also depend upon other people and the earth itself for our wellbeing.

Surely, that is the message we receive when we listen carefully to this morning’s reading from the Book of Deuteronomy. Walter Brueggemann describes Deuteronomy as a word from “the border.” The ancient Hebrews have been freed from their slavery in the land of Egypt and have been led through the wilderness for forty years. There, God has sustained them. In times of thirst, God provided water from a rock. In times of hunger, God fed them with manna. In their wanderings, they knew their complete dependence upon God’s abundant grace and mercy. But now they are “on the border,” on the border of the land God is about to give them. Moses is worried. He is worried that once they are settled in the land and enjoy the fruit of their labor, and a measure of prosperity, they are going to forget their dependence upon God. They are going to think that they themselves are the authors of their own comfort and prosperity. They are going to forget the water from the rock and the manna from heaven. And their forgetfulness will lead to the lure of greed and power.

“Do not forget,” Moses tells the people. Remember what God did for you, and give thanks. Walter Brueggemann comments:

Remembering Yahweh [God] is not simply an act of religious

devotion. It is confessing a relation which keeps life historical,

which assures that newness comes from outside us, that life is

not at our disposal, that gifts can be given, that amazement and

gratitude are possible.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Our version of the Sukkot booth, which was constructed yesterday for today’s service, has through the centuries served to remind the Jewish people of the Exodus and their sojourn in the wilderness, and more importantly their dependency upon God. During the festival of the Booths (or Sukkot), which takes place at the time of the harvest, booths are constructed and people leave their homes to stay in them. They remember the time when their ancestors wandered in the wilderness and dwelt in tents. They remember and a spirit of gratitude is renewed within them. We, too, can remember. We can remember our immigrant past, the time when our ancestors travelled to this land and with the help of God and one another, made their way in a new and strange land. We must never forget their patience, their hard work, and their faithfulness. We must never forget the grace of dependency.

Turning to the Parable of the Talents, recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, may I suggest at the outset that the wealthy man of the story who asked his slaves to make money for him either did not know this morning’s passage from Deuteronomy, or, if he did, he completely ignored its truth.

In the past, we have made a mistake of identifying the wealthy man

with God. You know how it goes. Like the wealthy man of the parable, God gives us talents according to our abilities. Those who have more gifts must multiply them accordingly; those who have fewer gifts must still use them in God’s service; but never, never, should we be given just one talent, bury it in the ground. If we do, God will surely condemn us.

But the wealthy man is not like God. The testimony of the slave who buried his talent in the ground is clear. The wealthy man is harsh; he reaps where he does not sew. He is nothing like God. The wealthy man is exactly what Moses warns against. Greed is his game. He has no regard for what God requires. He has forgotten that it is God who gives.

The poor slave who buried his talent in the ground—was it simply out of fear that he did so, or was it because he refused to participate in the greed of his master? William Herzog in his fascinating book, *Parables as Subversive Speech,* views the slave who buried his master’s talent as the hero of the story.[[3]](#footnote-3) He suffers the fate of those who refuse to participate in a greedy economic system that thrives on usury, that is, making money by charging interest (something, by the way, the Hebrew scriptures prohibited). The wealthy man throws him out into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. The poor slave loses his livelihood and must join the ranks of the expendable poor. Perhaps Jesus by telling the story is saying that faithfulness to God, which may require us to say “no” to the lure of power and greed, will likely turn out to be costly indeed.

The wealthy man of the parable has taken life into his own hands. He has forgotten that it is God who gives. Indeed, can we not say that forgetfulness is the enemy of genuine gratitude? And can we not admit that most of the time, as we go about our daily business, we forget that all that we are and have belongs to God in the first place, and that we are called to be faithful stewards of all that God gives? With my nephew Sean who, when he was a little boy was offered a second helping of dinner by his grandmother, replied, “No grandma, thank you. Enough is all I want,” would that we could say the same. Enough is all we want.

My friends, may our Thanksgiving this year be a time for honesty, honesty in God’s presence and in the presence of one another. We forget that we are dependent upon God who is ready to supply our every need. Many of us have too much. We have lost touch with the natural world and are far too consumed with our technological devices. The truth that we are 6 % of the world’s population using 60 % of the earth’s resources has ceased to trouble us. We have forgotten that life is a gift from the hands of a gracious God.

May this Thanksgiving restore a spirit of gratitude within us. And may God, who provides us with every blessing in abundance, grant us the grace to be a blessing to one another, to the hungry and homeless who live among us, and to the earth itself. So will we more and more be the faithful, thankful people God has created us to be. Amen.

1. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1929, 1980) 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977) 54–55. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. William Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994) See Chapter 9, “The Vulnerability of the Whistle-blower.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)