

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
November 28, 2024 – Thanksgiving Day
Joel 2:21-27; Matthew 6:25-33
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

We have gathered here this morning to give thanks to God for our blessings. I'm sure that most of us regularly thank God for many of our blessings – our loved ones, our food and shelter, our church. But it is good to be reminded of blessings which we may not think of regularly. The Litany of Thanksgiving which we will pray together in a few minutes is a helpful guide, and I would encourage you to take home your service leaflets and use this litany in your private prayer.

As I prepared this homily, I kept hearing in my mind the words from "A General Thanksgiving" from the 1928 Prayer Book. You may know them, too. "We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all, for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory." One more excellent list to remember.

It is good to be reminded of the scope of our blessings because we human beings tend to take our blessings for granted, at least until we lose them. When we are reminded of all the blessings we enjoy, thanking God for them comes easily. But what about giving thanks to God for our hardships, our suffering? Is there a way to include that part of our experience in our personal litany of thanksgiving?

I think that in many cases for each of us we can look back on our memories of the bad events in our lives and give thanks to God because we can remember more than the bad event. We can remember how we got through, how we were delivered from our affliction or distress, how God acted to help us or strengthen us or heal us. We have strong biblical precedent for doing just this. This morning's reading from the second chapter of the Old Testament book of the prophet Joel is a lavish description of an abundance of good things – food and wine and oil – all provided by God for God's people. What we did not hear was the better part of two long chapters that preceded this, frightening descriptions of the devastation of the land before God had pity on God's people and reversed their misfortune. The people of God had suffered, but God had delivered them.

There is another way we might be thankful for our times of hardship and suffering. At those times we sometimes have remarkable experiences of God's closeness. We read this frequently in the lives of saints. Think of Julian of Norwich. She had her visions of Christ when she lay paralyzed and at the point of death at the age of 30. Julian reflected on those visions for the remainder of her long life, and her writings about the visions are a great contribution to the literature of Christian spirituality.

Many ordinary "saints" – you may be one of them – have had mystical experiences in times of illness or other suffering, experiences of a different quality and

intensity than at any other “ordinary” time, experiences that stay with a person for the rest of his or her life. Times of suffering and hardship certainly do not always lead to such experiences, but when they do, we may thank God for the blessing.

And finally, if you have prayed to God, asked God to help you, told God how angry you are about your suffering, complained to God about your lot in life, expressed any feelings to God in your times of difficulty, then you may thank the Spirit for helping you retain your connection to God in your time of hardship. It is a blessing to have the faith to stay connected, to not turn your back on God. As St. Paul writes, “the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26). If we recognize that the Holy Spirit is with us when we pray, we may thank God for that blessing.

Today we take the opportunity to give thanks to God for all the blessings we enjoy now and for all the blessings we have enjoyed in the past. We recall the many ways in which God has helped us and saved us in the past. We thank God for the ways in which God is helping us and saving us now. We affirm our faith that God’s saving work will go on in the future, in ways we have yet to see.

The General Thanksgiving in the 1928 Prayer Book ends this way: “And, we beseech thee, give us that due sense of all thy mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful; and that we show forth thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up our selves to thy service, and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days.”

On Thanksgiving Day it is especially fitting for us to ask how we can put our thanksgiving to God into practice, beyond our prayers. After all, the teaching of Jesus and the message of much of the Bible is that we are to be “doers of the word and not merely hearers” (James 1:22). Thanksgiving in action. In our reading from Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus teaches his disciples not to worry about having the necessities of life. He reminds us that God knows our needs and that God will provide.

It may be that we are called to act as God’s ambassadors to provide for other people’s needs. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we may be so moved by the contemplation of the blessings we have received from God that we share our blessings, spread them to others generously. We may do so with faith that our kind and generous words and deeds go on, beyond this time and place. When we act with generosity and compassion, God may bless our actions “forward” in ways we cannot imagine, in ways we may never even know about. No blessing is then lost. Blessings live on and on.

Today is a day for thanksgiving – for food and for all the blessings of our lives. Gathered here together, followers of Jesus, may we also remember to be thankful for what is much more important than a delicious feast. May we remember to be thankful for the goodness and faithfulness of our loving heavenly Father, for our faith in Jesus, and for all the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In Jesus’ name. Amen.