

SIMPLE GIFTS, SIMPLE PRAISE

For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. You shall eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land that he has given you. Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today.

When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.

Deuteronomy 8: 7-18

[Jesus said,] "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."

Matthew 6:25-34

Did you know that when the Apostle Paul was making his last journey, the journey that would take him to Rome, and a trial before the emperor, he and the Roman centurion in charge of his delivery, and the captain of the ship, all agreed that they should spend the winter in Phoenix before heading out to Rome.

Really—go look it up. Acts 27:12.

Since the harbor was not suitable for spending the winter, the majority was in favor of putting to sea from there, on the chance that somehow they could reach Phoenix, where they could spend the winter.

OK—it's not Phoenix, Arizona, in the Southwest of the US, but Phoenix, an ancient city in the Southwest of the island of Crete. Still, it is fascinating to read some of the trivial, seemingly non-essential details that cling to these ancient texts.

Often, at the end of his letters, Paul would add some personal notes, a shout-out to Phoebe or Aquila. But in the middle of one of these greetings, at the end of his second letter to Timothy, something suddenly occurs to him—maybe he felt a blast of cold air from an open window— and he writes, “When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas” and then, in another afterthought he adds, “also the books, and above all the parchments.”

It reminds us that the world of the Bible is not some remote, otherworldly setting, where people were only concerned about abstract “spiritual” matters. The texts we read give us a glimpse into how the gospel was not only written but also embodied by real people among real life situations and ordinary things—like cloaks and books and preparing for winter.

Even the deepest mysteries of the Christian faith—the sacraments of baptism and communion—even these sacred mysteries are grounded in real, ordinary, material things like water, bread, wine or juice. Jesus used the things of everyday life in his parables—everyday tasks like making bread, planting seeds, tending fields, herding sheep and goats, lighting oil lamps, and even the business practices of his day, managing vineyards and estates. All these ordinary things and everyday activities, he said, are signs of the kingdom of God which is growing up all around us and among us and even within us. So pay attention to things like yeast in bread dough, or the chickadees and nuthatches that flock to our feeders, or the begonias that bloom in our flowerbeds. If we have the eyes to see it, if we take the time to notice, all material things become windows to the presence and abundance of God that suffuses this world.

Some of you may remember a few years ago when our younger leaders and Nate went around and put sticky-notes on just about everything in the building, notes of thanksgiving. They invited us to give thanks—not just for the building and furnishings and the material things they saw, but also for the people who used it, the people who serve others with these material gifts, the actions of love and gestures of grace that occur on a daily basis in this place.

They showed us that it really is quite simple—we give thanks for everything.

But that can be a kind of cop-out. It can be so all-inclusive that it neglects to draw our attention to the simple gifts that we take for granted. Which, again, is why I found the notes so significant—because they drew our attention to the particular. Thanks for washing dishes, gathering up the garbage, organizing an activity, playing an instrument, or singing. Thanks for the simple material gifts like comfortable pews, reasonably comfortable temperatures. And my favorite of all the thank-you stickers was one that someone put on the wall between the two rest rooms. It said, “Thanks for the water and coffee and tea we drink,” and then added, “thanks for a place to put them when were through with them.”

It really is that simple. Simple gifts that we do not want to take for granted and simple thanks and praise. We don’t really need an elaborate theological analysis of thanksgiving. We simply stop, notice, pay attention to the simple things and give thanks. We bow our heads and hearts to the giver of blessings.

The reminder that was given to the people of Israel who were entering into the Promised Land is still relevant to us in our time and place. “Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.’ But remember the LORD your God, for it is [God] who gives you power to get wealth.”

Giving thanks, counting our blessings, is more than just compiling a list of the things we have acquired, and it is more than one-time expression of politeness for isolated gifts. Noticing and giving thanks for the simple gifts all around us is one way of acknowledging the activity of God in the real world of cloaks and bread and winter preparations.

It can also be a way of finding our calling in a world where there are underpaid workers and hungry children, and families who have to choose between paying for heat and paying for food for those hungry children. That's why I like what Fred Rogers has to say about counting our blessings. He says, "I believe it's a fact that *what we have* is less important than *what we make of* what we have. The real issue in life is not how many blessings we have, but what we do with our blessings. Some people have many blessings and hoard them. Some have few and give everything away."

Giving thanks is a life-long way of relating to God, the Giver, who provides all that we have. It is a way of understanding who God is and who we are and how we are connected.

It really is quite simple. Simple gifts, simple praise, simple thanks.

Thanks be to God.

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