



St. Paul's Episcopal Church - Delray Beach, Florida

Thanksgiving Day - Year A - November 27, 2008

Deuteronomy 8:7-18; Ps. 65; Luke 17:11-19

Preacher: The Reverend William H. Stokes, *Rector*

Are there some things for which we can be thankful?

In an article that appeared in Tuesday's *Wall Street Journal*, regular contributor, and *Smart Money Magazine* writer James B. Stewart wrote the following: "This is Thanksgiving week, and it's not a moment too soon for a day or two off. Given this fall's market gyrations, weekends have been among the few respites from the financial crisis, and even weekends are getting whittled away. I find I have to go online Sunday night to see what shock may be in store for Monday, as I did this past weekend to check on the fate of Citigroup. But surely even Henry Paulson is taking Thursday off."¹

Stewart continued, "No doubt all of us will indeed find many things for which to be grateful, and I doubt you need any guidance from me. But the fact remains that for most people, 2008 will not be a year that stands out for its financial blessings. I know many people who are distressed by their recent financial reversals, and pretending otherwise isn't going to make them any merrier. I can't make the market recoup all its losses, but confining ourselves strictly to matters financial, *are there at least some things we can be thankful for even if our net worth has taken a recent beating?*"²

That's a good and an important question today, isn't it? *Are there at least some things we can be thankful for even if our net worth has taken a recent beating?* Chances are you are in church this morning because you have already answered that question affirmatively. There are things, for which you can be thankful, and you are thankful, and you are here to offer that thanks up to God. Good for you.

There are, I am sure, some people in church, and many around the nation, who are struggling to feel thankful today. There are some who are in real pain, who have experienced genuine and heartbreaking losses: the death of a loved one; the diagnosis of a terminal illness; a marriage that has failed; the loss of a job; a house that has gone into foreclosure; a retirement fund has taken a devastating hit in the volatile market. Yes, there are many, very understandable reasons why some people may be finding it difficult to feel thankful today.

On the other hand, it is certain that some of the malaise being felt in our nation and in the world today is, at least in part, the result of distorted affections and priorities. A commentary appearing in this month's *Sojourner's Magazine* by Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor at United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas stated it well. Hamilton observes, "Our current economic crisis is in part about misplaced trust and faith between debtors and lenders."³ But as he indicates, this is only a part of the problem.

Hamilton writes, "The credit crisis points to the inadequacy of any ultimate credo whose object is anything but God. God is our refuge and strength. And God's sustaining power is not tied to the Dow...The underlying causes of the current economic crisis are not financial," Hamilton writes, "but spiritual."⁴

*"The credit crisis points to the inadequacy of any ultimate credo whose object is anything but God. God is our refuge and strength."*⁵ These are true statements. But they are true statements that are easily forgotten. They are especially forgotten in times of prosperity, when

human beings get caught up in themselves, in their own egos and accomplishments, and forget the giver of all things. Today's reading from Deuteronomy is insightful about this human tendency.

The book of Deuteronomy is framed as Moses' final address to the people Israel. Actually it is a series of final addresses by the aged Moses to the people. They have been through a great deal and God has been with them and led them all the way.

But the book of Deuteronomy is keenly aware of human frailties and, in this section of the book, there is a prescient knowledge of the human tendency to forget God when things are going well; when times are prosperous and the people are comfortable.

After an extensive opening in which the abundance of the new land and all its blessings are celebrated, Moses urges the people not to forget God, saying to them, "*You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land 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 giving you today*" (Deuteronomy 8:10 - 11).

It is clearly a deep concern of Moses' and the entire passage for moments later, Moses says to the people, "*When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, 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....*" (Deuteronomy 8:12 - 15). And again, Moses says, "*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....*" (Deuteronomy 8:17 - 18).

How appropriate these words are for many in our own day. How easily people forget. How easily people forget God. How easily people forget God as the source of all blessings and all life. How easily people forget to be thankful. Well, again, this is nothing new. Look at the Gospel reading appointed for today.

What an interesting selection those who developed the lectionary chose for Thanksgiving Day: a story about ten persons with leprosy who encounter Jesus on the road (Luke 17:11 - 19). I'm sure we are all familiar with the ancient world's antipathy toward lepers. Those who were afflicted with the disease knew they were anathema to the rest of society.

In today's reading from Luke, the text makes it clear that these ten lepers know their place in society. "*On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out to him*" (Luke 17:11 - 13). Did you catch that? "*Keeping their distance, they called out to him.*" Yes, they know their place.

But they have heard of Jesus and his reputation as a healer. They call out to him, "*Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!*" (Luke 17:13). "Have mercy, have compassion, show pity on us."

And he does. He says to them, "*Go and show yourselves to the priests.*" He tells them to go and show themselves to the priests because he knows that, by the time they get to the priests, they will be cured of their leprosy. The priests will have to certify that they are clean of the disease in order for them to reenter society. And sure enough as they went on their way, they were made clean. How do they respond to this?

Well, nine of them go on their way and we don't see them again. One, however, when he discovers that he has been healed, turns back and praises God with a loud voice (Luke 17:15). He returns to Jesus and prostrates himself before him in gratitude (Luke 17:16). And he was a Samaritan (Luke 17:16), which meant that among the Jews he was doubly cursed. *Jesus asked,*

“Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” (Luke 17:17-18).

Well what do you think? Were the other nine thankful to God? Do you think they were filled with gratitude? Perhaps they resented the fact that they had been afflicted with leprosy in the first place. Perhaps when they were cured and made clean, they figured it was nothing more than they deserved. Those ten persons with leprosy had suffered significant loss, the loss of their health; they had suffered being shunned by society. When they were made clean, only one gave thanks. It’s a pretty pointed story.

The late Henri Nouwen, a Roman Catholic priest and prolific writer on the Christian spiritual life, observed in a video I recently watched, that we human beings have all suffered significant losses: “the loss of family and friends; of our youth; of physical abilities; the loss of unlimited opportunities; the loss of our dreams.”⁶ Nouwen asks provocatively, “whether our losses lead to resentment or gratitude.”⁷ Nouwen sees these experiences of loss as filled with potential for us.

With profound insight, Nouwen states, “Mourning our losses is the first step toward gratitude for in mourning our losses, we come to know life as a gift. The beauty and preciousness of life is intimately linked to its fragility.”⁸

It is precisely this recognition of life as gift, precious and beautiful and fragile, as well as a recognition that there is one source and giver of the gift, that this day of Thanksgiving is about. You see, there are, indeed, many things for which we can be thankful today “even if our net worth is taking a beating.”⁹

May God bless you and yours with grace to acknowledge the beauty and preciousness of the many gifts of life. May God give you hearts that overflow with gratitude today and always and may your Thanksgiving Day be filled with an abundance of God’s blessings and love.

1. Stewart, James B. “A Reason to be Thankful: It Could Have Been Worse” - *The Wall Street Journal* - November 25, 2008 found at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122765274061457835.html>

2. Stewart, James B - “A Reason to Be Thankful: It Could have Been Worse”

4. Hamilton, Adam - “Faith, Hope and the Credit Crisis”

5. Hamilton, Adam - “Faith, Hope and the Credit Crisis”

6. Nouwen, Henri “With Burning Hearts” An Orbis Video produced and released by Henri Nouwen in 1995.

7. Nouwen, Henri “With Hearts Burning”

8. Nouwen, Henri ‘With Hearts Burning”

9. Stewart, James B. - “A Reason to Be Thankful: It Could have Been Worse”