

The Rev. Beverly Dempsey
November 20, 2011

"It is Right to Give God Thanks and Praise"

Deut 8: 1-20

Luke 17: 11-19

I call myself a third career pastor. The good news is that as I'm a member of a Trinitarian faith system, we can now call my professional life complete. Before seminary, I was consumer packaged goods marketer. And at the risk of evoking a gasp from at least 99% of us, before business school, I was a banker. To make matters more gasp-worthy, upon completion of the bank's commercial lending training program I sat on the foreign exchange desk in the trading room. My job was to advise corporations like 3M, National Geographic, Honeywell and The Marriott Corporation of what to do with their currency exposures from international operations.

I wouldn't take back those years for anything in the world. I loved the fast pace of the markets, getting up in the middle of the night to check positions, making calls at 3 in the morning to see if the dollar was still on a high. I loved the urgency of it all, buying and selling extremely large sums of money as soon as some economic statistic was released here or abroad. Mostly for me, it was about anticipating or knowing almost everything that was going on all around the world nearly as soon as it would happen, then banking on my analysis and intuition to gauge what my corporate clients should do. Fortunately, my analysis and intuition were most often good.

Life for me in the mid-80s was rush, right down to the closing bell on October 19, 1987. Black Monday. - The day the Dow lost nearly a quarter of its value and hundreds of millions of people around the world lost their fortunes. In my mind's eye, I can still see pink trade tickets all over the place. We all know that no single person was behind the crash. No single corporation. No single government entity. Lower retail sales mid-summer, a rising trade deficit near summer's end, inflation on the rise and a decision to lower interest rates by the Fed made selling easy when Congress began to debate regulation on corporate takeovers. The next thing we knew, then-Treasury Secretary James Baker was quoted as saying that the US wouldn't prop up a falling dollar. The bears were off to the races.

A couple of months later, Wall Street was released, starring Michael Douglas, Charlie Sheen, and Darryl Hannah. This movie is called the archetypal portrayal of 1980s excess, with Michael Douglas's character declaring, "Greed, for lack of a better word, is good."

Wall Street gets a bad wrap. Movies like this don't help. Sure, there are the Bernie Madoff types who'd take a friend's last dollar if they were craving a simple cup of coffee. But those same types of people exist in school systems, garbage collection, and even the ministry (just not the Presbyterian Church ☺). Overall, I just don't believe in my heart of hearts that the majority of folks trading corporate bonds or high priced stocks are out to stick it to the world. From my personal experience they're just fans of all that is intricate, fast paced and demanding. Knowledge is exciting. Capitalizing on that knowledge to make a buck is just plain fun.

There seems to be some ill-conceived notion that Wall Street decides who wins and who loses. There seems to be a popular belief that two thousand people milling about the

floor of the New York Stock Exchange collude with Board Members of the largest corporations whose stocks they're trading to determine the fate of Peoria. To the contrary, scripture tells us that God is our sole provider. It is the Lord our God who gives us the blessings of the land. Especially when we're in the midst of the desert wilderness, we need to remember that our Sovereign God is our only means of life and knowledge of this truth should engender our lasting dependence on God. When we slip into false notions that we (or others) are responsible for our prosperity – however we define it - we slip into an ill-founded embrace that false gods control our fate. Such reliance upon humankind perpetuates a kind of chaos that can be so destructive to anyone's well-being.

Yet the scripture, if not carefully read, can lead us down a slippery path.

When we accept that God gives us blessings, we can easily find ourselves believing that the wealth God has given us belongs to us and not ultimately to the God who is its source. In such instances we come to the belief that God gives us what we deserve then sets us loose to enjoy it forever. This could easily have the incipient effect of leading us to think that we have the power that keeps us in that blessed place. It could also lead us to set up a false dichotomy between the haves and the have-nots - the blessed ones and the ones not worthy to be blessed.

Think of these three potentially dangerous outcomes to such thinking:

First, it could fuel the prosperity theology of many who claim that faith, donations and positive thinking are the three criteria upon which God judges those worthy to receive. If only you have more faith, God will bless you with a bigger house. If only you financially support a certain ministry, God will give you the spouse you deserve. If only you use pietistic language, God will shower upon you the money you need to live a comfortable – dare I say, blessed - life. Such a reading of God's word that suggests that you and I are in control of what our blessings are (or should be) is what lures us to abrogate our responsibility to carry the ancient Hebrew law into our Christian context, follow the example of Christ and serve the least of these. Why should I give anyone anything at all? If others would have faith like mine, giving that's great, and language of Christian prosperity, they would be blessed, too! I hope we agree that's hogwash.

Second, a human construct that sets up those deemed "blessed" against those deemed "not" can lead us to a kind of blame orientation. In such conversations, those who see themselves as "not blessed" by the world's standards criticize those who they see as "well blessed" by the world's standards. The converse is also true. A sense of entitlement can kick in on both sides, with frustrations mounting about how or why some should voluntarily reapportion their blessings to the aid of those who are deeply without.

Third, a dichotomy that sets up an opposition between those deemed blessed and those who don't see themselves that way can distract us from counting what might seem like the smallest of God's gifts as good and valuable and necessary. We recognize as important only what could be perceived as the greatest blessings. We can begin to squander our blessings from God, not fully appreciating that each gift as intended for the spreading of the gospel on earth and the strengthening of Christ's kingdom in the world. (Kind of as a funny aside, I have to tell you that last week's confirmation class reminded me that every little blessing is important. Even a something like bumping the side of your foot against the dresser in the middle of the night is a blessing when compared with the pain of bumping your little toe.)

God blesses each one of us, for richer or poorer. The question is: what do we do with that blessing?

1. Do we lord our blessings over others, accusing that they have a long way to go before God blesses them as richly?
2. Do we evaluate others' blessings and either demand or shrink from a reapportionment?
3. Do we engage in a continual game of bitter comparison of all the blessings God has bestowed?

Scripture tells us that God simply asks that we remember the Lord as the source of our blessings. Once we internalize that our blessings are from God, we must allow this understanding to evoke our service and worship of God. Our blessings, no matter how large or how small, become grounds for our grateful response to serve and worship the Lord. Then, life will become less a matter of comparisons and more a matter of mutuality and thanksgiving to the God who gives us life. This becomes our task as Christians, individually and corporately.

The story of Jesus' healing of the ten lepers cuts to the heart of the matter. Jesus blessed the outcast men whom society would otherwise deem unworthy to be in the company of a Jew. By blessing the lepers, Jesus wasn't intending to serve his own glory. Jesus was serving God's glory so that the blessing the men received was deemed worthy of praise and worship to God. - Because in keeping with the law and the truth, praise of God should always follow a blessing. This becomes the characteristic response of those who are blessed throughout Luke's gospel, especially among those whom society has labeled as the underdog. John Carroll, Professor of New Testament at Union Seminary in Richmond, Virginia says it this way." (In Luke's Gospel,) divine mercy overlooks conventional social structures and lifts up the marginalized; it even reaches beyond the borders of the people to embrace the excluded and outsiders. ...the place of the "righteous" becomes increasingly precarious. It is the (least of these who receive God's blessing and rush to worship the Lord) while those who were powerful, healthy, and respected lodge their protest and turn away. So even a Samaritan discerns with eyes of faith the transformative event of his (blessing), and follows his (blessing) with grateful doxology. The last word of the story belongs to Jesus. It is by now a familiar refrain: "Get up and go on your way.""

And this is where we are today.

"Social systems are necessary and inevitable. In order to establish and sustain its identity, any social group (even those which would have us believe that they are more blessed) does its part to maintain boundaries. Especially when a (group feels a serious threat to its well-being, these... boundaries become even more firm). In our gospel reading this morning, Jesus pushes beyond the secure borders (of Jewish tradition and blesses - or serves - in the name of God.) What matters finally is not the category of social definition...but receptivity to the (blessings of God), thankful praise of (the one who makes our blessings known) and a grateful action in keeping with Christ's charge to serve the least of these."¹

Throughout the world today, many of us are preoccupied with our own survival. The world's financial system is in upheaval. The real estate markets are strained. Unemployment levels are staggering. Beyond Mike Treni's plan, there is no clear agenda for how to make it

¹ Tom Carroll, PhD, Commentary on Luke 17, as found in *Between Sermon and Text*

right.

In such a context, the blaming of those who appear to be “most blessed” or “unworthy” is inevitable, albeit being grossly unfortunate and short-sighted. In today’s headline debate, I do not intend to leverage this pulpit to either side’s defense. But I do believe that it would be a pity if such an environment led Christians to forget that each one of us is blessed in God’s own way and that each one of us is called by God to worship and serve the Lord in thankful response - neither hoarding nor squandering all that we’ve been blessed to receive.