

Deuteronomy 8:7-18

“Thanksgiving and Amnesia”

November 20, 2011

Thanksgiving Sunday

Maple Grove UMC

Where I grew up there is one family with a lot of money. Like most families in the area, they started out humbly enough, growing grain and raising cattle. Every generation they worked hard, added a little more land, and were comfortable though not affluent. Until oil was discovered on their land. Then a man, roughly my parents' age, who inherited every scrap of land he owned and who got rich watching someone else pump oil out of it, became utterly unbearable. He took his money as license to be boss everyone around and to look down on neighbors he'd known all his life. One day after having to deal with this man, my mother, in a rare outburst of criticism, said, “He's forgotten where he came from. He acts like he *earned* that money!”

My mom's remark gets at the heart of what Moses is saying in Deuteronomy 8. After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the people of Israel are ready to enter into the Promised Land at long last. Joyous as this moment is, Moses knows it's also fraught with danger. For when they've got it made, he knows, when life is good and easy, they will be tempted to forget where they came from,

tempted not to remember it was the Lord who gave it all to them. We will be tempted, Moses knew, to forget and not to remember.

Did you notice how often those two words appear in chapter 8:

- Verse 2: REMEMBER the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years . . .
- Verse 12: When you have eaten your fill and built houses, when your herds and flocks and all that you have multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, FORGETTING the Lord your God.
- Verse 18: But REMEMBER the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth.

What Moses is saying, in effect, is this: No matter how well things go for you in the new land, DON'T FORGET WHERE YOU CAME FROM and DON'T ACT LIKE YOU EARNED IT. Because no matter how hard you work, houses and fields and flocks are the Lord's doing, not yours. So remember, and don't forget.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it this way: PROSPERITY CAUSES AMNESIA. The reason, he says, "is that when you can't remember poorer, more precarious time, then

everything you've got seems not only natural and normal, but also self-generated, as though you did it all yourself. And that, Brueggemann says, makes gratitude unnecessary. If you've done it all yourself, he concludes, there isn't anyone to thank.¹

That's precisely what happened to the oil-rich farmer back home in Kansas—he got so pleased with himself, he came to believe there wasn't anyone to thank. And as Moses understood, it can happen so easily to all of us, even if we don't quite strike oil. What most of us want and work for is to be comfortable and financially secure. Yet it is precisely comfort and security that tend to make us forget how much we rely on the Lord. It may not always be true, but it's true enough to say it: the less people have, the more thankful they tend to be for what they do have. And the more we have, the less thankful we tend to be.

Prosperity causes amnesia. And the antidote is simple gratitude. Thank you, God, for the house, the apartment, the dorm room, the space in someone's basement. And thank you, God, for the turkey and dressing, the ham sandwich, the can of beans. Whatever it is, it's from you. Remember and give thanks.

Now, I suppose this is not the best time for this message, three years into the worst recession in a generation. Though prosperity is relative and most of us actually look pretty well fed, many people are going through a hard time. But it's not only prosperity that causes amnesia. How about this one: Busy-ness causes amnesia. It may not be so much that I don't intend to thank God for my blessings, but when would I find time?

Henri Nouwen noted that we can scarcely enjoy anything because we have so many things; we are too distracted, too busy multi-tasking to really pay attention to any one thing. Take, for example, something as simple and yet as wonderful as drinking a cup of coffee, something I do several times a day. But seldom do we just drink the coffee. No, we barely even notice the coffee because as we drink it we are also reading the paper, making a lunch, listening for the dryer to stop, and have one eye on Good Morning America. Suddenly we notice that the coffee's gone cold, so we put it in the microwave, only to forget it again and find it still in there the next morning. Busy-ness causes amnesia.

But if we ever just drank the coffee, says Nouwen, giving our whole attention to it, thanking God for it, rejoicing in that simple but

wonderful pleasure—why it would be a religious experience! Just imagine if you lived your whole life like that—really noticing the things around you one by one, really paying attention to people, and giving thanks for each one in turn. Poet Mary Oliver has put it this way: “I don’t know exactly what a prayer is. / I do know how to pay attention.”² Busy-ness causes amnesia, and the antidote is gratitude, taking time to thank God, to experience the goodness of one thing at a time.

Just a few days from now Carolyn and the girls and I will gather for Thanksgiving dinner with the only family I have in Ohio—that is, with you, our Maple Grove family. Al Foulger has invited me to give the blessing before that feast. (He probably felt obligated.) And I’ve been giving some thought to what I will say, looking around for some model prayers.

I found one Thanksgiving prayer. It’s prayed by the father of a family in the movie *Shenandoah*, a western from the 1960s starring Jimmy Stewart. He prayed, “Lord, we cleared this land, we plowed it, sowed it, and harvested it. We cooked the harvest. It wouldn’t be here, and we wouldn’t be eatin’ it if we hadn’t done it all ourselves.

We worked dog-bone hard for every crumb and morsel, but we thank you just the same, anyway, Lord, for this food we're about to eat.

Amen."³ And Moses rolled over in his grave!

No, my prayer is still in process, but here's what I've got so far.

Will you pray with me?

"On this Thanksgiving Day, Lord, thank you for this cup of coffee. Oh, there are so many other things I could thank you for. But for right now, Lord, thank you for this cup of coffee—the way it smells, for the way it warms my hands and how the steam rises from it, for the brightness of the cup, for the comforting way it tastes, for how it reminds me of my grandma who always smelled like coffee. Help me, Lord, not to be too busy, too distracted, too frazzled, to notice, to really pay attention to this cup of coffee.

Thank you, Lord, for this cup of coffee—I didn't make it, I didn't pour it, I didn't grow the beans or purify the water. I didn't make the sun shine on the fields where it was grown or create the chemistry of caffeine. The money that bought this coffee, Lord, and all the food I'll eat today, came from donations, freely given by people some of whom I don't even know. Help me to remember, Lord, that I didn't

earn it. This coffee came from you, God, and I am grateful for every last sip. Amen.”

Now, here’s your assignment. What kind of prayer will you offer this Thanksgiving? However much you’ve got, or don’t have, this year, will you remember not to act like you earned it? And however much you have to do, will you take time to be grateful for just one thing?

Prosperity and busy-ness cause amnesia. And the antidote is gratitude.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storeyed Universe* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 177.

² Mary Oliver, “The Summer Day,” *New and Selected Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 94.

³ Quoted in Carolyn Brown, *Forbid Them Not, Year A*, 201.