

Sermon

What Shall I Return?

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, October 30, 2022

21st Sunday After Pentecost

All Saints

Eph. 1:11 In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, 12 so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. 13 In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; 14 this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

15 I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason 16 I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. 17 I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, 18 so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, 19 and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. 20 God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. 22 And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Psalm 116

I love the Lord, because he has heard

my voice and my supplications.

2 *Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.*

3 *The snares of death encompassed me;
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;
I suffered distress and anguish.*

4 *Then I called on the name of the Lord:
“O Lord, I pray, save my life!”*

5 *Gracious is the Lord, and righteous;
our God is merciful.*

6 *The Lord protects the simple;
when I was brought low, he saved me.*

7 *Return, O my soul, to your rest,
for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you.*

8 *For you have delivered my (life) from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling.*

9 *I walk before the Lord
in the land of the living.*

10 *I kept my faith, even when I said,
“I am greatly afflicted”;*

11 *I said in my consternation,
“Everyone is a liar.”*

12 *What shall I return to the Lord
for all his bounty to me?*

13 *I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the Lord,*

14 *I will pay my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people.*

15 *Precious in the sight of the Lord
is the death of his faithful ones.*

16 *O Lord, I am your servant;
I am your servant, the child of your serving girl.*

- You have loosed my bonds.*
- 17 *I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice
and call on the name of the Lord.*
- 18 *I will pay my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people,*
- 19 *in the courts of the house of the Lord,
in your midst, O Jerusalem.*
- Praise the Lord!*

I. I don't know about you but I love Fall.

- A. Though I love it most for the cooler temperatures and the beauty of leaves changing color...**
- B. I also love it for the way it reminds me of the rhythm of God's created order.**
- 1. In recent weeks as I've driven I've noticed the fields gleaned of the harvest.**
 - 2. In my first call I was in a setting where many of my parishioners were farmers. I learned in those early years of ministry what deep faith it takes to be a farmer...**
- C. I do not take the harvest for granted — but to offer my glad thanksgiving to God for the bounty which the earth provides.**

II. The practice of thanksgiving has historically been connected to the Fall Harvest.

- A. Of course it would**
- 1. The long months of labor**
 - 2. The many restless nights praying for rain or sunshine**
 - 3. Worry about pests which might steal the crop right in front of you...**

- a. **My mother’s escalating militarization of the blue-berry bushes.**
- B. In the Fall with the crop safely gathered in people could pause in glad thanksgiving for the harvest —**
 - 1. **Secure in the knowledge that come whatever else - they would not go hungry through the Winter.**
- C. Let us not overlook the pattern of**
 - 1. **real risk/anxiety — Knowing of our vulnerability**
 - 2. **Glad thanksgiving that when “All creation looked to God for its food in due season . . . God opened up God’s hand and satisfied the desires of every living thing.” Ps 104:24**
- D. This too explains the long historical connection between churches and the “Fall-stewardship campaign.”**
 - 1. **At the time of bringing the harvest home Disciples of Jesus naturally also asked “What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?”**

III. And so we come to our own Generosity Sunday

- A. Given that so many of us are now rather far-removed from the work of bringing in a crop — we tend to speak about generosity by speaking about money.**
- B. I am not shy about mentioning money from the pulpit.**

C. What we choose to do with our money says much about what we truly believe in.

IV. Psalm 116 is a classic example of how the Hebrew bible thinks about thanksgiving and about making public displays of gift-giving to God in response.

A. Let us first notice that the impulse to ask “What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?” Is not arbitrary or impulsive.

1. *It grows from an experience of God.*

2. A particular kind of experience.

a. The Psalmist has been *rescued by God and knows it.*

3 *The snares of death encompassed me;
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;
I suffered distress and anguish.*

4 *Then I called on the name of the Lord:
“O Lord, I pray, save my life!”*

5 *Gracious is the Lord, and righteous;
our God is merciful.*

6 *The Lord protects the simple;
when I was brought low, he saved me.*

7 *Return, O my soul, to your rest,
for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you.*

B. This is someone who has been at their wits-end — at the very edge of their capacity to cope, who cried out to God . . .

1. And learned that God is “gracious and merciful . . . and protects the simple.”

C. But that is not all! Notice how patiently the Psalmist lines out the particulars of God’s help:

*For you have delivered my [life] from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling.*

9 *I walk before the Lord
in the land of the living.*

D. THEREFORE — “What return shall Make?”

- 1. The act of returning gifts to God has meaning and depth in proportion to the experience one has of God’s redemptive presence in life.**

V. Perhaps you and I do not live with the kind of food-insecurity which gave right to the Fall-practice of thanksgiving . . .

A. But I’ll wager that we have all had experiences of being at our wits-end . . . of being at the very edge of our ability to cope.

- 1. And if in those hours we can also look back and see the presence of God with us working to redeem us — then we will naturally and easily be able to join with the Psalmist and billions of faithful people who for thousands of years have been returning a portion of their life and labor to God in glad thanksgiving.**

B. Some theologians argue that North American Christians, who are so insulated from any kind of insecurity, are not likely to be generous givers . . . because the depth of one’s generosity is so often tied to the depth of one’s sense of gratitude . . .

1. **And I hear that. No doubt it is true to some degree.**
- C. **But if many of us do not know food-insecurity . . . we nevertheless know well the many other troubles which life can bring.**
- D. **As I review just a few of my own - I invite you to reflect on your own moments of trial, crying out, and the experience of God's redemption.**
 1. **I've never been hungry much . . . but**
 2. **I recall in an hour of desperation and darkness caused by depression - an experience of God which called me out of my darkness and set my feet on the long road to recovery.**
 3. **I remember in the hours following my father's untimely death - having the sense that God was near me and was weeping with me as I wept.**
 4. **I remember my surprise in 2007 when I broke down in shuddering tears at the news that I had been given a Lilly-Endowment sabbatical and it was only then, as I contemplated the opportunity to set down the burden of my pastoral duties for four months that I realized how burned-out and desperate I really was.**
 5. **We have all known hours of trial and trouble and we have also known that God was with us in the time of great trouble. We know the truth of Psalm 46:**

God is our refuge and strength,

a very present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,

*though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.*

VI. And finally, let us notice that the Psalmist does not simply say “thanks.”

A. The Psalmist says,

- 14 *I will pay my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people.*
- 15 *Precious in the sight of the Lord
is the death of his faithful ones.*
- 16 *O Lord, I am your servant;
I am your servant, the child of your serving girl.
You have loosed my bonds.*
- 17 *I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice
and call on the name of the Lord.*
- 18 *I will pay my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people,*
- 19 *in the courts of the house of the Lord,
in your midst, O Jerusalem.
Praise the Lord!*

B. Twice the Psalmist says, “I will pay my vows in the presence of others.”

1. That is - I will make a public showing of my gratitude for God’s many acts of rescue by “paying a vow to the Lord.”

C. The bible knows that this is not limited to some kind of private spiritual practice.

1. It is a public and material practice too!

VII. Now I will not talk to you about budgets and all of that.

A. You are clever people - you know that there is a connection between our choice to be generous and

this church's capacity to do good and life-changing ministry.

B. I will only say this.

- 1. If you and I are serious about reviewing our life and remembering (as the Psalmist does) the hours when God rescued us in our hours of peril —**
- 2. and if we let those recollections move us to give thanks to God - not just with our lips ... but with our thank-offerings**
- 3. And if our realization that God has been there for us *before* in our hour of need leads us to trust that God will *continue* to be there for us**

C. I suspect that our generosity will come easily and joyfully and I suspect that the budget will take care of itself.

D. So, friends, I ask you in the name of the Lord:

*What shall we return to the Lord
for all his bounty to us?*