

(About the Collect): Do we give thanks for the people who bless our lives as well as for the blessings? Do we accept the responsibilities along with those blessings (The two come together. For example, you can't have genuine freedom without real responsibility; there can be no true love without real hardship). Also, isn't it interesting that we are blessed with bounties for the provision of the needs of others. I mentioned on Wednesday night that the fruits of the Holy Spirit are placed upon us for the delight of others. Your joy is destined to delight those around you. It is to the benefit of those you love that the Holy Spirit blesses you with kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control. Blessings from God are as useless as ice to Eskimos if we clutch them tightly to ourselves.

In the Old Testament Lesson for today, did you notice the reason that the Children of Israel are brought into the Promised Land. Moses says it is so they may "bless the Lord your God for the good land he has given you." This brings me to a strange kind of paradox I have noticed in life. During my year of Sabbatical before coming to this pulpit, I had the great pleasure of doing something I don't often get to do, and that was to worship together with my wife, not as someone leading the service but as a member of the Congregation. So, I had this amazing blessing that many of you spouses may take for granted which was to get ready for Church and leave the house together. And Donna would often have on a particularly nice looking dress, and yes an especially fetching hat, and I often found myself saying, "Sweetheart you look lovely; I love you!" And she might reply, "No, I look lovely because you love me." Now, when you read the physical description of the Promised Land, we hear of "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, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you might lack nothing, and eat your fill." Is Moses, through the Holy Spirit talking about this amazing land of ours as well? Are we to bless The Lord because of this wondrous land? Ah, but is the reverse of that same corollary of my wife on Sunday true for this wondrous land as well? So, if we forget to bless the Lord, is it still a wondrous land?" And further, if we deem it no longer necessary to bless the name of The Lord, will the nation one day become a house of slavery, where we wander shepherd-less through a terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes continually threaten us with their lies and wicked scorpions with their deception? Will we be condemned to eke out a Spiritless existence from a life as hard as flint rock if we forget to bless the name of The Lord? That's more than a remote possibility. So, part of our Thanksgiving to God needs to come in the form our regular obedience to his commandments. Obedience is, after all, an essential component in the Great Commission.

The Psalm this morning is appropriate. It is one of the dozen or so pieces of poetry in the Psalter that focuses on Thanksgiving to God; this one especially explores the blessings of the harvest and the created order. It takes the inclusiveness of God's blessing and our consequent outpouring of praise to a new level. Not only are all people to be blessed by the faith in God first found in Abraham and perfected by Our Lord and Savior on the Cross. We find that even nature itself joins in this chorus of praising God for his abundant blessing. So another dimension of truly holy Thanksgiving is found. In addition to our giving thanks to God through our faithful obedience to his commandments, we are also to thank him through joyous praise.

James says that you and I are the first fruits of creation. The metaphor is a popular one for Paul, too. And if you and I are to be an offering to God and to his glory, yes we must be acceptable to him as holy, so we are indeed obedient to his Commandments, just as the Old Testament Lesson would teach us. But, in addition to offering Thanksgiving to God through our Obedience as indicated in the passage from Deuteronomy, and besides offering Thanksgiving to God through joyful praise as the Psalter today would have God's people do, there is another kind of Thanksgiving Offering described by Jesus' little brother. Because James specifically says, *"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do."* (Jas.1:23-25, NIV)

It seems to me that here James is talking about something more than just obedience. He's actually talking about living life in such a way so that your transformation from Glory to Glory as you walk with God on a daily basis is apparent to all. Further, there are some control issues that need to be dealt with here, and I'm not talking about the oft-witnessed obsession that certain people have to be in control of their lives (and the lives of others), and we're going to talk about those kind of control issues in just a moment, too.

No, what James is talking about here is not too much control but rather a lack of it, and specifically a lack of control of ourselves. It has taken more than a half-century for some insights to get through the quarter-inch-or-so of bone in my skull is how different it is for our lives to be impacted by our thoughts than by our feelings. It's astonishing when I look back on my own 60 odd years how much of my life I have let be ruled by feeling. And, to be honest, since feelings are nigh-on impossible to control, that means when we let our emotions govern our actions we are really in a kind of slavery. But, man is given a brain to do something more than simply govern our tear-ducts and our smile-muscles. And when we actually start trying to live life according to the Godly reason that comes to the mature Christian, especially when we have walked for a while in the company of the Spirit of God, we find a certain freedom from that emotional enslavement. And in fact it does become possible to even tame the human tongue and refrain, though imperfectly, from hurtful, angry words that wound and cripple those we love. And then, people actually begin to take note of our Christian witness as we begin to devote ourselves to those so far worse off in our lives than we are – our modern vulnerable and outcast societal equivalents of the orphans widows who lived in the Jerusalem of Jesus' younger brother. Yes, part of Offering Thanksgiving to God comes through our Integrity in the Christian life and witness.

The Gospel passage for Thanksgiving Sunday may seem a strange choice, but it's not. Because, you see, if you're too busy worrying about things in this life, there's no way you can adequately give Thanks for the Father for all the blessings we have on a daily basis. Worry kills Thanksgiving, no two ways about it. So part of Thanksgiving to God is offered up when the Christian is able to live a life of quiet confidence. Here I find I need to quote you something, not from the Bible but from something else. It is this:

"Go placidly amid the noise and the haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence. As far as possible, without surrender, be on good terms with all persons. Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others, even to the dull and the ignorant; they too have their story. Avoid loud and aggressive persons; they are vexatious to the spirit. If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain or bitter, for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself. Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans. Keep interested in your own career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time. Exercise caution in your business affairs, for the world is full of trickery. But let this not blind you to what virtue there is; many persons strive for high ideals, and everywhere life is full of heroism. Be yourself. Especially, do not feign affection. Neither be cynical about love; for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment it is as perennial as the grass. Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth. Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune. But do not distress yourself with dark imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness. Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself. You are a child of the universe no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should. Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be. And whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life, keep peace in your soul. With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Be cheerful. Strive to be happy." That's *Desiderata* by Max Erhmann. No, it's not Christian verse from God's Word, and I don't necessarily see the universe from all the same viewpoints, but there is great wisdom in this sentiment of "Go placidly amidst the noise and haste of this world."

Donna and I chose the passage as the Gospel Lesson from Matthew 6 for our Marriage. It's because I am a champion worrier. I can worry with the best of them. But if I can just stop for a moment to count the blessings in my life from my Father, my worries really do melt like a late snow in the Spring Sunshine.

This week is Thanksgiving. And this is central to our witness as Children of God. So let us truly be a people of thanksgiving, offering up that thanks through our obedience, our praise, our integrity in Christian living, and our shunning of worry, putting in its place our joyous faith. And if we can do this, I have not doubt that yes, we will indeed find it is a beautiful, beautiful life. JWB+ 11-18-17