

SERMON

+ Pentecost 16, Harvest

September 17, 2023

"Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!"
Paul calls us to our Harvest theme.

And he's right, of course.
Because if there is any response we could and should make
to the celebration of Harvest
and the abundance God has given us,
it's thanksgiving.

Our nation has its own day for Thanksgiving, of course,
when we all take a Thursday in November
to gather with family
and eat a Thanksgiving dinner.

But for us and our celebration of Harvest today,
this is our Thanksgiving, too:
Thanks for the gift of the harvest,
and the gift of the opportunity to plant and nurture.

Thanks for the sunshine and the rain,
the season of planting
the season of growth,
the season of the harvest,
and even the winter season of rest.

But while we all reap the bounty of the harvest,
not many of us are directly involved
with that agricultural process
that produces the bountiful harvest we celebrate.
So giving thanks for the harvest could remind us
that there's so much more to give thanks for,
whether or not we planted even a radish or a rose.

We give thanks for life itself,
Our health, even if we suffer.
For the bounty of our table
even if it isn't our favorite dish.

Our community, our neighbors, our family,
and all those with whom we live in relationship,
even when those relationships are strained.

Our schools and all who teach and learn.
Our jobs and our fulfilling retirement.

Our mission, our active ministry, and our resources
with which we help those in various needs.
The groups and institutions we support –
who are partners with us
in serving people around the world.

Celebrating Harvest is a reminder
that we have so much to be thankful for
and that thanksgiving is indeed a daily event
in each of our lives
for the many things we receive
each moment of our lives.

Thanksgiving really is a lifestyle
and not just a day set apart
like today, or even Thanksgiving.

Paul reminds us
who deserves our thanks,
and why.

We thank God
for his abundant and indescribable gift.

Moses was very concerned in our first reading
that the people of Israel would forget –
once they had settled into the promised land –
they'd forget that God gave them the land,
led them to it,
and produced the bounty they would come to know in it.

Because that is our human nature.
It is our tendency –
our default setting as human beings –
to think we've done it ourselves,
that our own work is the source of our profit,
that we have somehow earned it,
and even more, deserve it.

So Paul begins by reminding us of the basic fact
that all we have to give thanks for
is a gift from God.
But Paul is also very specific

about how we give thanks –
our motivation and our feelings about it –
without regret, not under compulsion.
Because by our giving thanks
we bear witness to others of our faith
in the God who provides for us.

The reason Paul is writing to the Corinthians
about the generous and abundant nature of God
is to encourage the Corinthians to give
to his collection for the church in Jerusalem.
For Paul, God's generous giving to us
is the source, motive, and foundation
of our generous giving to others.

The way one gives thanks, says Paul,
is to pay the generosity of God forward
and give to others.

And not because we have to
by any law of reciprocity,
or because we're compelled to
by someone who convinces us we should,
but because we want to.
Because we are so fully aware of God's generosity to us,
that in our deep, deep gratitude,
we thank God by sharing that generosity with others,
cheerfully, gratefully, joyfully.

When that happens, explains Paul –
when those who receive in abundance
give to others cheerfully and generously,
at least three parties receive gifts and blessings.

First, he says, are those who give the gift.
Giving cheerfully to another
is, itself, a source of gratitude –
a sense of good and well-being and fulfillment
that is a great gift to the giver –
a sense of gratitude for the opportunity to give.

Second, of course, are those
who receive the gifts.
They give thanks for the gift.

But third, says Paul,

those who witness the gift-giving receive the greatest gift –
the opportunity to see faith in action,
a living out of the gospel of Jesus,
a proclamation of the command to love acted out.

Not that we give to get their attention.
But that they will see.
And those who do, see a witness to faith.

Last week, the Meadows Nursing Home staff
and our Head Start children
were those who received our gifts with gratitude.

And many of you knew the joy and gratitude
that comes from being the ones who gave,
because you donated those cookies or arranged them
or you donated those children's sneakers.

But we all had the joy and gratitude
that comes with witnessing faith in action,
seeing the gospel lived out,
and the proclamation of love as deed.

That is the third benefit of the act of giving.
And I suspect a fourth
is a satisfied smile on the face of God.

So here we are, gathered to thank God
for the bounty of the harvest
as an intentional part of a lifestyle of thanksgiving.
And out of our own bounty,
we give our gifts of food and money to others in need.

And the beauty of it all
is that they are blessed.
We are blessed.
And all who see it – including ourselves – are blessed, too,
because we get to see faith in action,
love lived out,
and the proclamation of the gospel as deed.

"Thanks be to God
for his indescribable gift!"
Indeed.