



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 13
Proper 16 (B)

Giving Thanks

RCL: 1 Kings 8:[1, 6, 10-11], 22-30, 41-43; Psalm 84; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

If it's October and your yard is full of maple oaks, you *could* spend days or even weeks, engaged in the backbreaking work of bending down to pick up each leaf and put it in a trash bag, but if you happen to have a leaf blower, you could take care of your yard in an hour or so. If, however, you get out of the shower and try to style your hair with that leaf blower — you will look totally bonkers. Lawn tools are invaluable for taking care of lawns but miserable for most other tasks.

In much the same way, humans are designed for one specific purpose. When we set ourselves to the task for which we were designed, everything goes marvelously: all seems right with the world. But when we forget what we are designed for, everything goes completely haywire, and we would be better off trying to fill our gas tanks with pickle juice than to live in ignorance of the ultimate point of our lives.

What we are made for, the basic function of a human being, is love, and specifically the love of God. We are designed for loving friendship with our Creator, but we don't come to this through either casually treating God like a pal, or by working to convince him that we are fantastic. Instead, we come into this loving relationship through receiving the world — all that we are and all that we have — as gifts from God, for we can only know God through thanksgiving. We give thanks, not because God either needs our praise, or appreciates the occasional pat on the back, but because God commands us to do so, not for his own sake, but for ours.

In the Garden of Eden, all things were given by God to Adam and Eve — the entire world, all food, everything — was a direct gift from God to his beloved creatures; everything they had was a sign of God's love and blessing.

The value of each bite of food was the fact that it revealed God's love to them, God's care for them. The nourishment they received which made their bodies strong, that stopped their hunger, was a secondary experience — the main experience was always of being loved. The world was valuable, not as a comfortable place to sleep or a lovely sunset, but every single person, place, and thing was an overwhelming experience of their communion with God.

In all the Garden of Eden, there was only one object that God did not give the humans: the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Everything else was a gift, a window into the glory of God, but because this tree was not given, it could be seen, not as a revelation or as a blessing, but as a good in and of itself.

Adam and Eve cast everything else aside and went for the thing in and of itself, and this is what we as humans have been doing ever since. Now when we grab a sandwich, it's not to feel God's love for us but to stop our stomachs from rumbling. When we get a paycheck, we aren't overwhelmed by thankfulness to God – instead, we look to see how much has been deducted. We think about how much we can put in savings, or maybe contemplate a little treat for ourselves.

We have lost the ability to commune with God through thanksgiving, we have forgotten to look around and to see what he is doing for us from millisecond to millisecond — giving us not just food and homes and friends and families, but the breath of life, our mental faculties, voices to praise him, hands with which to serve him. If we were in our right minds, nothing would be of value in and of itself, but the chief value of everything would be as a revelation of God's love and blessing to us.

And so today, Jesus comes to the disciples and says, if you are too blind to see me in all that I give you, if you won't see my love in all that you have, then I give you myself – my own body and blood. Unless you eat it in thanksgiving, you will have no life in you. And the disciples say, “Give us your... what?! This sounds bizarre! Nonsensical!” They say, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” And we're told that, “Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” This teaching that Christ would give us his actual flesh, his actual blood – it was gross, it was weird, it was utterly incomprehensible, and many gave up being his disciples altogether.

“Eucharist” in Greek literally means “thanksgiving”. It is the act of taking the ordinary food that God has blessed us with, our ordinary daily bread and wine, and sacrificing it — giving it back to God to show our praise and thanksgiving to him.

When we make sacrifices to God, when we give of our time, when we give of our wealth, when we return our daily bread to him, this is not something that we do for his benefit, but for ourselves: we force ourselves to return to right relationship — to the true thankfulness that is the only perspective from which we can know God.

God receives our gifts and pours out the Holy Spirit upon them, and the ordinary bread and wine of our sacrifice become the body and blood of Christ. Jesus said, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.” Through our act of thanksgiving, through our Eucharist, we come into the presence of this flesh and blood, and when we eat of it, we begin to abide in Christ, and he in us, and we in the Father through him.

But the Eucharist is not a simple status change. You don't receive Holy Communion and return to your regular old life. Instead, we have to be open to the grace of the sacrament, we have to allow God's grace to shape us, to transform us into Eucharistic beings: into Christians who give thanks to God in all times and all places.

Many in the Church are unable to receive the Eucharist often because they may be homebound or their parish may be without a priest. Many others have not received the Eucharist in over a year because the pandemic has kept our churches from safely opening their doors. But the frequency of our reception is not what makes a Eucharistic life; instead, it is being for others a vision of the grace of God, the peace of God, the joy of God in living a life of thanksgiving.

You stop at a traffic light and see a homeless man waving a sign, and think, "This is awkward, now I have to avoid eye contact for the next 30 seconds, or worse I have to give him a dollar, just to not feel guilty." Or you can pray, "*What* a blessing that I get to serve as Christ's hands in this moment, that I get to share Christ's love through a dollar or a sandwich or a conversation over lunch."

You encounter always your furious neighbor who seems to do nothing but seethe and post nutty political rants on social media. You can think, "Here we go again. I'm going to do what I can to ignore this moron." Or you can pray, "Thank you, God, for bringing me together with my brother. May I be to him an oasis of your peace, a messenger of your grace."

You can go into your home or a doctor's appointment, into work or to the movies, either thinking about your own goals, your own concerns, *or* you can allow the Eucharist to form you, allow eternal life to shape you — you can see every single thing in your life as an overwhelming sign of God's infinite love for you and give thanks.

In so doing, you will abide in Christ and he in you. In so doing, you allow eternal life to take root in you. In so doing, you begin to live, not on Earth but in Heaven, for this is eternal life — this is what those in heaven experience. It is a constant revelation of God's love, a constant overwhelming experience of God's infinite goodness.

Will you be like Adam and Eve, will you be like those disciples who rejected the body and blood of Christ, or will you allow the transformation that God has begun in you to shape your life, making every moment and experience of the love of God?

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