

Hebrews 5:1-10
Job 38:1-7, 34-41

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 25, 2009, Stewardship Sunday

GRATITUDE FOR ALL GOD'S GOODNESS

“What is the way to place where the light is distributed,
or where the east wind is scattered upon the earth?” *Job 38:24*

Today is Stewardship Sunday, which is to say at the outset that it has little to do with money and everything to do with *gratitude*. Gratitude that is summed up in Job 42:5, where Job, after hearing God's grilling of him about how the universe works, stands in utter silence and awe. All Job can say is:

“I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you.”

The confrontation between God and Job toward the end of the book is about defining the relationship between God and humankind, in the light of which Job's gratitude breaks like a dam burst, demolishing Job's terrible aloneness as God's vastness, majesty and incomprehensibility break over him.

Job is a book that is often deeply unsettling to anyone reaching out of hard times and looking for answers. This is the stance of Job and his three companions, like most of us, at one time or another. But what God does in calling Job (and us) to task, is what any parent does to a young child. We cannot explain much to an infant. We simply have to set the parameters and earn their trust. Beyond that the child is powerless to comprehend. There is no answer to Job's suffering. It is not heaven sent, it is in the *nature* of things which work mostly benevolently, sometimes at odds with us. God simply requires that our part of the relationship be one of trust—first, to know our place. There are no answers sufficient to explain what Job has had to endure—the loss of well-being, loved ones, home, and physical affliction. He is not promised freedom from death, but the end of the book can be read, like Christ's, as freedom *through* death. And so with us. “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's,” wrote Paul (*Romans 14:8*). Job does not get answers, as we do not get answers. What he gets is a shell-shock of awe. And awe is the bedrock of gratitude.

For two chapters (38-39) God holds up to Job a spectacular array of the works of nature, its incomprehensible richness, beauty, wisdom, and providential care, that Job (and so we) cannot begin to equal or even comprehend. It would be like asking an infant to match the brilliance of an ever changing rosy-fingered dawn with something made from a set of LEGO-blocks. God is vast in power and skill and imagination beyond our dreaming. What Job is led to feel is overwhelming awe in the face of such contrast of God's caring, creative governance of the whole universe. Awe and silence breed gratitude beyond our capacity for words. It is this same awe and gratitude that is at the heart of our response to the gospel of Christ.

This past week in the UK I took a day, as I do each trip to England, to make a personal pilgrimage to the Lake District, just an hour away from the family home. This day I spent almost exclusively at the historic home of John Ruskin overlooking Lake Coniston. It was a bleak, cold rainy day of the sort that characterizes northwest England. We used to say, “I remember summer last year, it was on a Thursday.” Ruskin was a polymath, a brilliant artist, art critic, architect, writer, and social reformer whose ideas, since his death in 1900, have had an enormous influence on British society—public education for all, state health care, public libraries open to all people, and a host more. Ruskin had the capacity to look at everyday things for hours—a leaf, a flower, a piece of wood, a hillside rock, and distill from them a world of ideas and analogy. He lived in awe of nature and nature's God, and his gratitude for creation's wisdom impacted a whole nation's well-being. So, last evening, tucking into a splendid dinner that friends in the church had provided in Jane's illness, I was compelled to pause in wonder and gratitude at the fruits of the earth that a short while ago did not exist, yet now come to nourish me. The bread, potatoes, chicken, lettuce, soup, all of them sprung by God's mysterious grace, and a little human tending, to nourish us.

When the church is at its best it is responding to God's generosity: God's companionship, the food from God's hand, our shelter, our healing—and when healing does not come in time, the promise of our redemption anyway, and God's inexhaustible love. These things call us to be likeminded in praise, thanksgiving and service.

The Christian philosopher Dallas Willard has written:

I am learning from Jesus to live my life as Jesus would live my life if he were I. I am not necessarily learning to do everything Jesus did, but am learning how to do everything I do in the manner that he did all that he did.

So when St. John's is at its best it responds with senseless acts of beauty.

- Stripping the Angel tree bare of a hundred and fifty or more paper angels, each with a child's name on it. Grateful for the chance to clothe and bring joy to inner city children, and thereby, to their families.
- Or our support of Philabundance in the city, that brings food and produce to those in need.
- Or Habitat, and John McClintick's inspirational Build-Off competition that creates house frames, then finished houses, for those in need.
- Or our adult and children's mission trips.
- Preparing a sumptuous meal for Supper at St. John's on Wednesday nights, and the rich reflective study time afterward when we probe the heart of God, and ourselves.
- Or service days twice a year, when we put a shine on this lovely gift of God we call our beloved St. John's (there's one next Sunday after church).
- Or the hours of selfless service that our deacons and care-givers bring to families with sickness, or travel needs.
- And the hours of volunteer service that our trustees put in to manage this lovely property and its finances, all volunteered.

All this and much more speaks of a wide out-flowing of gratitude.

Something else happens, too. Gratitude, as well as being directed outward to others, and therefore to God, changes our disposition toward ourselves. It changes how we *see* ourselves, and how we see ourselves has a huge impact on what we do within our community.

Some consider their lives their achievement, after all they got their education, worked hard, perhaps to build a business, and bring security to their family. One can understand these things. Others believe their lives, with all its good propensities, talents and achievements are gracious gifts from God. It's a lot easier for the latter to let go of what they have because they know that what they have was never theirs in the first place, just things on loan from the creator of all things, for which they are truly grateful.

Gratitude is a huge part of worship. We come here, hopefully, wanting to be made over, cleansed, renewed, and newly oriented. Confession is a part of that. Remember the woman of the street who came uninvited into the Pharisees home where Jesus had been invited as a guest—if invited with ulterior motives. When the host saw the prostitute washing Jesus' feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair, he was appalled. But Jesus said "the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Thereby, the one who has been forgiven much, will love much (*Luke 7:47*), and their gratitude is great.

Do you recall Maimonides ladder of charity that we used for the bulletin cover a couple of weeks ago? It speaks of eight stages of giving, the highest of which is when neither the giver nor the receiver knows the other. I had a lovely sense of that last week in the UK. My two older brothers and I were clearing out our mother's home, as she recently had to move to a nursing home. The nearby town of Preston is historically a very blue collar town, long at the heart of the industrial revolution. It was the town Charles Dickens chose as his model for his novel, *Hard Times*, about the desperate plight of the industrial poor. There are still many poor in Preston. So we arranged for the local YMCA to pick up the furniture, while all the household goods and clothing, etc, we jammed into the car and I took them to the Rwanda Shop in town. It's a tiny store not much bigger than the brides room here, and is crammed from floor to ceiling with every conceivable item for resale. After carrying in lots of bags, I took in my mother's electric sewing machine that she exchanged for the old treadle machine fifty years ago. Could they use it?, I asked. There was a screech of delight from the two volunteers. "Someone called just yesterday, desperate to find an old sewing machine," they said, scrambling for the telephone number.

As I drove home, basking in the glow of someone's need being fulfilled, it occurred to me what a panoply of good our little act had done. It helped the Rwanda house stay in business, by virtues of the modest resale of our items. The proceeds will help the far-off people of Rwanda. The recipient of the sewing machine would be overjoyed, perhaps

because it enabled him or her to have a little business and be productive. It blesses whoever receives the clothing, or whatever is produced on the sewing machine. And our modest giving far outpaced any sense of loss and attachment to those things.

To all these benefactors, these little things bequeath strands of hope. Dr. Tom Gillespie, former president of Princeton Seminary, once told us that while it was important to learn how to perform a baptism, a wedding, or a funeral, the most important thing he wanted his graduates to be able to take in the leadership of worship was to bring people hope. It is hope that makes of the grateful heart a living doxology. Gratitude feeds love, hope, all our service, and our prayers to the One whom we engage as our faithful partner, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

I close with these two offerings, the first drawn from Archbishop Oscar Romero's book, *The Violence of Love*. Archbishop Romero, you may recall, was murdered by thugs who gunned him down in his cathedral in El Salvador as he was celebrating mass. In a book published after his death, he noted that sometimes a good God calls the church to suffer in order to be part of God's goodness.

This is the mission entrusted to the church, and it is a hard mission: to uproot sins from history, to uproot sins from the political order, to uproot sins from the economy, to uproot wherever they are. What a hard task! It has to meet with conflicts amid so much selfishness, so much pride, so much vanity, so many who have enthroned the reign of sin among us. The church must suffer for speaking the truth, for pointing out sin, for uprooting sin. No one wants to have a sore spot touched, and therefore a society with so many sores twitches when someone has the courage to touch it and say, "You have to treat that. You have to get rid of that." Believe in Christ and be converted. (trans. James R. Brockman, pp. 29-30).

The second is from Robert B. Roberts' book, *Taking the Word to Heart: Self and Other in an Age of Therapies*.

In September through November of 1989, East Germany experienced what came to be called the October Revolution [a lovely irony], in which the forty year old communist government fell with remarkably little violence. The church, especially the Nikolai Church of Leipzig, played an important role in encouraging and keeping nonviolent the increasingly large demonstrations that followed its Monday evening prayer services for peace. The church's involvement sometimes took courage. On October 9, it appeared that things might get very bloody, as the people were becoming bolder in the wake of Mikhael Gorbachev's recent visit, and leader, Erich Honecker, had given written orders for a "Chinese solution": shooting up the crowd. The Lutheran bishop warned of a bloodbath, and doctors cleared hospital rooms to accommodate the wounded, but the leaders of the Nikolai Church decided not to cancel the prayer service for that evening. After the service, the demonstrators numbered 50,000; by the end of the evening there were 150,000 in the crowd. Because Egon Krenz, a Politburo member in charge of security, countermanded Honecker's order for violence in a striking act of insubordination, the demonstration remained peaceful and became the turning point of the October Revolution. Some weeks later, demonstrators hung a banner across a Leipzig street. *Wir Danken Dir, Kirche* (WE THANK YOU, CHURCH). With grateful hearts, we thank you, Lord Jesus. Amen.