

Do you have space for Gratitude?

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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Scripture: Deuteronomy 26: 1-11

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, you shall make this response before the LORD your God:

A wandering Aramean was my ancestor...

Gerhart von Rad calls this passage a central “credo” of Israel’s faith.¹

With this credo the community of faith remembers itself by recounting its story. The Bible story, our faith story tells us, that the Israelites have arrived in the Promised Land after decades of journeying through heat, hunger and thirst; their trust in God was tested, and they failed time and again, yet God continually loved them, regardless of their foibles. After all that, they are given land. One **could** feel entitled to a great deal, having survived all that. This is *our* land... our crops are flourishing *thanks to us!* Rituals like the presentation of the first fruits to the priest here, are meant to remind them, and us today, to be thankful.

Remember where you came from. Remember that what you have is a privilege, not at all earned.

Scholar Diana Butler Bass told the story to an audience in Washington D.C. where I was offered continuing education. She had a contract to write about “Gratitude”, but, then the unimaginable happened; Americans elected Donald J. Trump as President! She was devastated. Didn’t even want to get out of bed for days.

Eventually she began her research for what became her book: *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*.² She says that writing the book on Gratitude saved her life! She came to recognize in her own life how difficult it was to show gratitude in many ways. She traced it to growing up in a family where, as she puts it, there was a “gratitude deficit” – she learned ingratitude.

If we think about it, there are many factors today that contribute towards a collective gratitude deficit: busy lives; stress; financial woes, relationship breakdown; all accumulate as spiritual clutter in us and can make us miserly. I had a friend whose parents faced great hardship, but with hard work they gave their children a better life. Unfortunately they conveyed to their children a sense of fear that their fortune might suddenly change. So they learned to save, clinging to the money for fear of what disaster tomorrow might bring.

Of course Jesus teaches exactly the opposite; he speaks of a sower who throws the seeds with abandon, and a father who hands over the whole inheritance to his son. We

¹ Brian C. Jones. Commentary on Deuteronomy 26: 1-11. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/>

² Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks. © 2018, Diana Butler Bass. HarperCollins books, New York.

all know the storyline, the son fritters away the money on a decadent life – then returns home, wondering if he will be welcomed. Of course the father welcomes the son home with open arms. Now let's be honest, if we were there, hearing first hand, as Jesus told those parables, might we not say, "Jesus, that father was so naïve!" Or, "What a waste of seeds!"?

When I was in Bethlehem, in the West Bank, I had opportunity to hike along the countryside. On my travels I often saw illegal Jewish settlements dominating the hilltops – sometimes entire cities of Jewish people built on plundered Palestinian land. That picture of settlements haunts me today, ever more as I hear Hebrew Scripture passages claiming a holy voice and granting permission to Israelites to conquer the Canaanites, the indigenous people in that Promised Land.

Many of the occupants of those settlements are encouraged by the state of Israel to emigrate from other countries to make Israel great again. I wandered into a settlement, chatted with residents, and casually asked them if they knew the Palestinian neighbours. The reality is that water supply in Palestine is very limited. Settlements can consume as much as 80% of the water, leaving a pittance for the neighbouring Palestinians. Some settlement dwellers are oblivious to this when I share this reality with them. Others matter-of-factly told me that it was their right to settle in this land given to them by God. Palestinians must go. That sense of entitlement is totally out of step with the spirit of the Torah, of course. In the Hebrew Scriptures the obligation is placed on the faithful: to share the land especially with the poor, the widows & orphans, immigrants and Levites.³

Butler Bass points out in her book that gratitude takes work. It sometimes takes personal emotional and psychological work; buried under traumas and brokenness, there is great risk as we re-connect with our deep needs. But, in that connecting with our feelings and emotions, we also connect with a deep sense of gratitude. That sounds like possible Lenten work for some among us.

In his commentary on today's Deuteronomy passage, Brian C. Jones suggests that part of the work we must do is to remember our faith stories; to tell them over and over again. He puts it this way:

When we forget our faith stories, the religious self formed by those stories shrinks and is replaced by another self, the self produced by competing cultural stories. The writers of Deuteronomy were keenly aware of this.⁴

Our children sift through social media where they regularly encounter myths presented as facts. Think about the spiritual clutter we all collect from the media; stories and perspectives that shock us, frighten us, and generally reinforce polarities of perspective around us.

The storytellers of Deuteronomy, the Gospel storytellers, invite us to resist the cultural stories that threaten to claim us. Our faith stories tell us to resist the mindset your world teaches that your blessings are limited; *for A wandering Aramean was your ancestor, [who] went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he*

³ Jones.

⁴ Ibid

became a great nation. What a heritage we have in this faith. So we are invited to give the very best of what we have, the best of who we are, and God will always be faithful.

Our faith stories call us to resist the attitude that immigrants and people different from us are to be feared; in the Hebrew Scriptures it was often immigrants whom God shone through most powerfully. Remember too that Jesus picked a Samaritan, generally understood as an enemy of Jesus' Jewish listeners. The despised Samaritan was the hero in a parable, saving a Jewish man left for dead.

I want to end with two claims of Diana Butler Bass that stuck with me after listening to her. First: Gratitude is resilience. Studies have shown that gratitude is simply good for our health. Grateful people are happy people. Finally: Gratitude is resistance. I think many of us, like Butler Bass, have had to learn gratitude, or perhaps to unlearn ungratefulness. My son Benjamin was having a bit of a temper tantrum. He reactively said to me: I hate you daddy. [I *know* he loves me.] But I really caught him off guard by saying: I love you Benjamin. I then gave him a big hug.

Fear and hatred *are* powerful, but *no match* for someone filled with Gratitude and Love. But it must be gratitude and love that is deep and authentic in us. Let us all make it our Lenten project to do some spiritual spring cleaning, and to make space for Gratitude. Amen.