

Sermon for Sunday, November 26, 2017
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

It's just over
nineteen years
since I came to the United States.
And when I arrived
my understanding of the Thanksgiving holiday
was pretty much limited to
American TV,
and in particular
the Brady Bunch,
that episode
where they dressed up
as pilgrims.

I remember
being invited to someone's home that first year
and us all gathering around the piano
to sing
Thanksgiving hymns.

Almost two decades later,
and I've experienced a whole range of Thanksgiving traditions.
That was the only place
where people sang hymns before sitting down to eat,
but I've sat with a Jewish friend and her nominally Christian husband,
and been asked to pray.
I've sat with a huge table with four generations of a Caribbean-American family, parents
and children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren,
as the patriarch of the family blessed the food
and all of us.
I've sat at another extended family meal,
where at the ripe age of forty,
I was still privileged to sit at the folding table at the end
with the "children."
And a couple of years, I've sat at home alone
because it didn't occur to anyone

that with no family in this country,
I might have nowhere to go.
But I was too embarrassed
to ask anyone
if I might join them.
And recently, I've spent most thanksgiving dinners
with my goddaughter's family.

This year
was my last American Thanksgiving,
at least for the immediate future.
And it is one of the traditions
that I will miss.
In this world
where religion often gets short shrift,
the notion that across this nation
people will gather together this Thursday
to be thankful
is something to treasure.

Last Sunday night,
at the community thanksgiving service,
we read from the book of Deuteronomy.

For forty years
the people of God had been wandering around the wilderness, forty years
of temporary homes
and long memories
and sometimes waning hope.
But now, finally,
they were standing on the edge of the promised land.
Just one small river
blocking their way.

And there in the valley, Moses gathered them together
and reminded them of all
that God had done for them, telling and retelling the story
of those long years of uncertainty, and reminding them
that now was not the time
to forget.

Moses reminded the people
of the words the Lord spoke at the mountain,
a voice out of the darkness,
a mountain burning with fire,
words written on stone tablets
that many of us know today
as the ten commandments,
but not the only commandments.

And because the heart of all the commandments
was loving God.
Moses reminded them
of the words that we know
as the Shema,
“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one.
You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all
your might.”

And then, then Moses began to speak of the blessings
that they would receive
in this promised land,
blessings beyond their imagination
after that long time in the wilderness,
no more trying to pray water from a rock
or depending on manna appearing when food was scarce.
Now they would live
in a land with flowing streams,
a land with springs and underground waters
 welling up in valleys and hills,
a land of wheat and barley,
a land of vines and fig trees and pomegranates,
a land of olive trees and honey,
a land of bread, and more bread, without scarcity,
a land with stones of iron
 and hills of copper.
A land of plenty.
They would be blessed.

But the danger,

the danger was
that they might forget
who it was had blessed them.
Who it was
who had rescued them from slavery,
who it was
who had kept them the wilderness,
who it was
who gave them a land of such plenty.

God.
God who created all life,
God had blessed them.
And they, in turn
were to bless God.
To bless God
remembering that everything they had been given
came not through their own actions,
but from God.

And not only
to bless God
but to walk in God's ways,
to respond to God,
by keeping those commandments
that they had been given.

We too
have been blessed by God, blessed by God
more than we can imagine.
And at Thanksgiving
we are reminded
to give thanks.

But I suspect
that we sometimes face
the same danger
that the people of God faced.
In the midst of all the blessing,
there's a risk

that we will forget
God.
Forget
that if we are honest,
most of our blessings
have come to us as a gift.

You see, we become so accustomed, so comfortable
in our lives
that we somehow imagine
that it was we who earned it.

We may have struggled, we may have worked,
but underlying it all,
we have been blessed by God.

Blessed
to be living in a land of plenty,
though some still
go without.
Blessed to live in a land of safety
though some still
live in fear.
Blessed to live in a land of promise
though some still
struggle to hope.

We are blessed.

And, Moses reminds us,
our response to that blessing
is not only to bless God, to give God thanks,
but to live in God's way.

A way that Jesus summed up in words from Deuteronomy
and from Leviticus
that we know as the two great commandments.
You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all
your mind. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Meeting blessing
with blessing.

Today our gospel reading
was a parable that Jesus told
about a king
who gathered all the people together
and began to divide them,
some going to the left
and some to the right.
And the king told the ones on the right
that they were blessed, that they would be rewarded.
“Why?” they asked.
“I was hungry and you gave me food,
I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,
I was a stranger and you welcomed me,
I was naked and you gave me clothing,
I was sick and you took care of me,
I was in prison and you visited me.”

“Uh, we don’t remember doing any of that for you.”

“You did, when you did it for
the least important of my people.”

It’s probably the most challenging thing
I’ve ever read in scriptures.
Because I want to think of myself as a nice person,
I want to think of myself
as being willing to bless others with the blessings
that I have been given.
But only
within reason.
As long as it doesn’t
cost me too much.
As long as it doesn’t
interrupt my life.

Some years ago
I heard

of someone who would become homeless
two days
before thanksgiving.
And all I could think of
as I thought of this person
was this passage.
And Jesus.
Stupid Jesus.
How dare he?

And I found myself saying,
come stay at the rectory
for a month or two.

A month or two
turned into close on a year,
and I found myself not so much blessing,
as I had expected,
as being blessed.
By that other person.
By God.

And so this Thanksgiving I invite you
to remember your blessings.
Bless God.
And bless
one another.