

“GIVING THANKS”

1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Psalm 107:1-15,17-22, 43

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If you've ever studied Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, you might be just a little bit surprised at the positive, hopeful, and, above all, *grateful*, tone of his words here at the beginning. The reason he's writing to these folks at all is that he has some ... concerns about them. He has learned that there are some deep and serious conflicts (which reflect some deep and serious theological misunderstandings) going on in their congregation. The purpose of the letter is to address those problems. Nevertheless, his starting point is gratitude. Why? Because no matter how big the problems or how great his concern, Paul sees beyond those things. He doesn't base his hope on how well the Corinthian Christians are doing (or not doing) at this moment. He can be grateful for these fellow Christians and their community, even when they're not at their best, because the basis of his hope for them is the faithfulness of God.

That perspective – that gratitude – helps him to see the many gifts and the strengths this community has. It'd be easy, given the issues, to overlook the gifts the members of that faith community have. It'd be easy to simply see them as a problem, as dysfunctional, as a failing church, perhaps. But Paul's belief in God's grace prompts him to point out – and give thanks for – the ways God's grace has been given to and manifest in this community of faith.

You can hear that when Paul talks about grace here, he's not just talking about forgiveness: God's grace is also the force that empowers and gifts and strengthens believers for faithful living and the church for ministry.

This is what it is to be “in Christ,” to use Paul's language: to become part of a bond, a relationship in which believers are united with Christ and with each other. In and through this fellowship, God is at work.

There may be disagreements and challenges. Many things may change. Old traditions may no longer be meaningful; new ones may evolve. Changing needs may demand new forms of ministry. Diverse cultures may share faith in their own ways. New learning and different perspectives may open up unexpected paths. There might be things to fear, hard work to do, suffering to endure. There might be a lot of resources to steward, or there might be lean times. We might do a lot of things right, or a lot of things wrong. But it doesn't matter. The church is sustained, ultimately, by the faithfulness of God. WE are sustained, each of us, and all of us, by the faithfulness of God.

This passage invites us to offer thanks to God, not for material gifts, but for spiritual gifts, and for everything that it means to belong to Christ, and above all for the faithfulness of God.

I find this a really useful perspective to consider, as we approach Thanksgiving. I've come to believe (and I suspect many of you would agree with me) that gratitude is a simple but profoundly important part of the spiritual life. Anybody can practice it. And gratitude changes our perspective on nearly everything. Gratitude changes our relationships with other people. Gratitude changes our relationship with God. Practicing gratitude changes *us*. It's both humbling and empowering. It frees us and it connects us.

At the same time, I find that we need to be a little careful about the way we practice gratitude, especially in a culture of abundance. Thankfulness can morph pretty easily into self-congratulation, especially when we are giving thanks for things like material things and opportunity and nice families and friends. And it can hint at an unspoken corollary: that maybe those without those blessings don't deserve them anyway.

But it seems to me that perhaps our perspective shifts just a little if we begin by thinking about the faithfulness of God rather than all that we have to enjoy.

Think about all that God never seems to tire of doing: hearing prayers, loving us, inspiring people to creativity and service, holding the world together.

Think of the sun's energy, air to breathe, gravity, beauty, the senses with which we encounter the world.

Think about all that God has put up with from you; think about all the times you haven't thought about God at all, or remembered to say "thank you."

Think about all the things God has brought you through, everything God has taught you, all the ways you are not "self-made."

Think about how God has always sustained the church – even when there was persecution, even when the church itself was corrupt and compromised, there were always those who managed to keep the word and love and ministry of Christ alive.

Think about the spiritual gifts of others through which you are blessed, whether those gifts be prayer, teaching, listening, leadership, whatever.

Think about where hope comes from, and compassion, and redemption.

Think about forgiveness, and more forgiveness.

Think about what Jesus means to us.

Think about what it means to belong, to be part of God's family.

Think about what it means that, no matter what we do or don't do, God is faithful.

The Psalm we read from also celebrates God's faithfulness.

The Hebrew word is *hesed* ... "faithfulness" or "loyal love."

This, too, is essentially, a thanksgiving for a *relationship* with a loving and faithful God.

It reiterates God's readiness to help, to hear those who cry out to God in their times of distress. There's no self-help in this Psalm, there is only the cry of desperation. God responds because of God's love. This is our history, the psalm writer seems to say: we have a God who brings us through wilderness wandering, through hunger and thirst, through darkness and oppression, through sickness, even through lostness and rebellion.

It is about the faithfulness and redemptive power of God. It's not about salvation by and by though. It clearly expresses a faith that sees God at work in the lives of God's people in this world. It's a story of God's hand at work both to help individuals in times of need *and* to protect and save the community of God's people.

The Psalm itself is a piece of liturgy – which of course means it's for the whole community. Those who prayed it might not all have experienced the various troubles therein personally; but it's not meant as a recitation of how God helped *those other people* who got into difficulties: everyone who prayed it, everyone who prays it, is invited into its gratitude for God's faithfulness, which is never because of us, but in spite of us.

The Psalm teaches us to understand ourselves as the redeemed.
We are the hungry and thirsty who have been fed and given drink.
We are the bound who have been liberated.
We are the sinners who have been forgiven.
We are the fearful who have been given hope.

Let us give thanks – today, this week, all our lives - for the amazing, completely undeserved, bottomless well of God's faithful love.

Resources:

Psalms (Interpretation Commentary) by James Mays

Feasting on the Word, Year B, volume 1: articles on 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 by Carlos F. Caroloza-Orlandi, Martin B. Copenhaver, and Charles Campbell.