

Preached by Rev. JF Hudson: 11/11/07
Scripture: Haggai 1:15-2:9

Giving our Best in Gratitude

“Yet now take courage, says the Lord; take courage...all you people of the land, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. Do not fear.” --Haggai 1, excerpts

It is always a risky proposition to mix talk of war with talk of God. In human history we've all seen how it is so tempting to imagine that somehow, well our God is on our side, and gives us the right in might, to carry out this mass act of violence that is war. As Civil War General George Sherman said put it so directly, “War is hell.” And yet when we get down to the trenches of the battles, to the real flesh and blood people who served and serve on our behalf, who come back never quite the same, physically and emotionally wounded, or never came back home at all, we also see in war the highest acts of human virtue. In his amazing documentary about the Second World War, “The War” that recently showed on PBS, Ken Burns described this dichotomy thus: “The greatest cataclysm in history grew out of ancient and ordinary human emotions: anger and arrogance and bigotry, victim-hood and the lust for power; and it ended because other human qualities: courage and perseverance, and selflessness, faith, leadership and the hunger for freedom combined with unimaginable brutality, to change the course of human events.”

One poignant and haunting song plays throughout “The War”, “American Anthem”, written by Gene Scheer and sung by Norah Jones. For me, its lyrics portray so powerfully the gratitude, gratitude, that fueled a generation's will to give and to serve and to sacrifice. Jones sings, “All we've been given by those who came before, The dream of a nation where freedom would endure. The work and prayers of centuries have brought us to this day. What shall be our legacy, what will our children say? Let them say of me I was one who believed in sharing the blessings that I've received. Let me know in my heart that when my days are through, America, America, I gave my best to you.”

Sharing the blessings that we have received, in our as lives Christians, grace from God—blessings: in war's service, in hoped for days of peace, in all of life, and in gratitude. On this second Stewardship Sunday, on Veteran's Day, it is right that we would examine this precious ideal of giving our best back to God in gratitude, our best in thanksgiving, back to a generous God who daily gifts us with the miracle called human life. Do we ever really appreciate fully just how blessed each of us is in this life, even with all the struggles we sometimes face? And in thanks to God for those gifts--freedom, safety, love, meaning, hope--are we ready to render back unto our Lord, a portion of these daily blessings?

A caveat: when I speak of God's blessings I do not mean to say that God blesses some more and some less for capricious or arbitrary reasons. As Jesus declares in Matthew 5:44, “God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” Blessings are universal.

To fully appreciate the life we have been given by God—this is the first step in giving our best in gratitude. In 1994 I led a ten-day trip to the northern highlands of

Guatemala for Habitat for Humanity. Ten of us Americans worked side by side with Quiche Indians to build simple, decent homes. I was so blown away by the poverty of that place. By the little kids who got sick and sometimes died because health care was not available. By the shacks they called home which barely sheltered them from the elements. By their often meager stores of food which our host families continually and generously shared with us at meal time. The first day back in the states I went to a grocery store but had to leave it after five minutes because I was so overwhelmed, embarrassed even, by the bounty within, by row after row after row of fresh food, and medicine and stuff, so much stuff! It was a faith “A ha!” moment for me.

I’ve got so much. I’ve got too much. And I’ve got to give back more—more money, more time, more talents--so fellow children of God like my new friends in Guatemala, so they too can live. That’s my faith responsibility. Much given. Much expected.

Friends—on this crisp fall day, as we worship without fear and in freedom, and bask in beautiful music, and revel in friendships, and live in safe shelter and sit at full tables, and work at jobs that pay us so much, are we awake to all we’ve been given? Aware. Appreciative. Alive to life. The secret to giving generously, to not holding back, whether it is money, or love, or service, is to first take stock of our lives and face the truth of that bounty. And then to give: not out of guilt, not out of shame, not out of fear, not out of obligation, but out of gratitude. Gratitude.

To give because we have been given too—this is not a quid pro quo either, as in “OK God you blessed me with my life, so I owe you this much.” Good stewardship is more like more like a graceful and free act of generosity, a sincere response to the Divine’s shower of love, knowing we can’t ever repay to God all that we have been given.

Not unlike how I think about, say, my parents—how could ever give them back enough of me—my love, my time, my support and help—to say thanks for all that they have done for me? I can’t—that balance sheet will always be out of whack. But I can strive in thanksgiving to give my best to them in thanks while I am still blessed to have both of them in my life.

My country—yes it is less than perfect and yes the leaders we choose to elect sometimes break our social hearts and let us down greatly and yet—how could I ever repay this nation all the blessings I receive as a citizen? The freedom to vote and speak—look at Pakistan, Burma. Consider what a gift is that we can tell President Bush or Speaker Pelosi that we can’t stand their policies and not get beaten, arrested or executed for this opinion!

My church, this church—our church. Just this week right here: alcoholics gathered to face their addictions. Children in church school gathered to learn of Jesus and his love. Teens gathered in the Sexuality Class to learn about the awesome gift and responsibility of their God-given bodies and souls. Four-hundred mourners gathered to weep and say goodbye to an old dear friend named George Sturgis. Professional staff gathered to plan for a wonderful Advent and Christmas season. Broken-hearted folks found their way into the Pastor’s office for counsel and comfort. And we gather this day to sing and pray and think. Could any of us ever repay the church for all it has done and will do to make our lives rich and God-filled? I think not and yet....

What we can do and give is this: a portion, a percentage, a generous part, a sacrificial gift of our money, rendering back to God, that which was and is God's in the first place. Trusting, in the words of the prophet Haggai, that God will continue to bless us. That God has promised to be with us, to give us courage, and to not fear for God has blessed us. God is blessing us. God will bless us.

As "American Anthem" concludes, "Each generation from the plains to distant shores, With the gifts they were given were determined to leave more. Battles fought together, acts of conscience fought alone, These are the seeds from which America has grown."

So Pilgrim Church friends, when it comes to stewardship and living a life of giving, what will be our legacy, what will our children say? Let them say of us we were ones who believed in sharing the blessings we've received. Let's give our best to God in gratitude. Let all the people say, "Amen!"