

NOW THANK WE ALL

Psalm 95.1-8

November 25, 2018, Thanksgiving Sunday

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Psalm 95.1-8a adapted from the *Inclusive Bible*

Come, let us sing joyfully to God!

Raise a shout to our rock, our deliverance!

Let us come into God's presence with thanksgiving,
and sing our praises with joy.

For God is great,
a great ruler above all.

O God, in your hands are the depths of the earth,
and the mountain peaks are yours too.

Yours is the sea, for you make it,
the dry land as well, for your hands formed it.

Come, let us bow down in worship;
let us kneel before God our Maker.

For you are our God,
and we are the people you shepherd,
the flock under your care.

If only you would hear God's voice today!
"Harden not your hearts."

Anthem: Sing to the Lord of Harvest

Come, let us sing joyfully to God!

*Let us come into God's presence with thanksgiving
and into God's courts with praise ...*

And today, if you hear God's voice,
do not harden your hearts.

If you have been wondering where this "Today, if you hear God's voice" thing comes from, here it is – Psalm 95. And it has its echo in the Christian scriptures in the book of Hebrews [3.7-8]

Honestly, I don't know when this became the signature closing of sermons for me. It just happened. And it happened early on in my preaching career.

Perhaps it was a kind of caveat. I don't presume that, just because I'm speaking, God is. I'm not under any illusions that what I have to say is automatically what God has to say. "Today IF you hear God's voice."

However, if you *do* hear something that sounds like that truth and that grace that could change your life, well then, for your sake, for the world's sake, for God's sake, keep your heart open. Let your heart be *broken* open if you have to. But whatever you do, do not harden your hearts.

Now, when I say, "today if *you* hear God's voice," the first "you" is me. I'm doing my best to pay attention, to listen, to stay open even when what I hear is challenging and painful. And it is sometimes. And I am as capable as anyone to mis-hear or to not hear anything at all.

So, when I say, "today if you hear God's voice," I am, first, talking to myself.

The second "you" in "today if you hear God's voice," is ... you – the individual you. And I know this happens sometimes because one of you will come to me and say, "it's like you were talking directly to me." Now it is usually not the case that I have a specific person in mind when I write a sermon. And I have discovered that sometimes people hear things I didn't exactly mean to say. But if it happens that you hear something that starts knocking on the door of your heart, please listen.

The third "you" in "today if you hear God's voice," is you *together*. It's that "y'all" pastor Anita talks about. It's the collective you.

One of the things I appreciate about Diana Butler Bass' book on gratitude is that she makes this helpful distinction between "me" gratitude and "we" gratitude.

There is the gratitude we experience as individuals – that awe, wonder, delight, that sometimes overwhelming sense of the giftedness of life and the everyday little acts of goodness that make us just stand back and say "thank you," no matter how inadequate those words might seem at the time.

That's the gratitude we can cultivate in our lives by practicing "thank you." As Spencer said last week, we can be grateful for being grateful, because sometimes our lives are so wracked by loss or pain that genuine, honest gratitude has to wait.

Studies show that genuine gratitude – and getting good at it – has a huge positive impact on your body and your soul.

The problem is, Bass says, that there is a "gratitude gap: we may be thankful in private, but individual gratefulness does not appear to make much difference in our common life ... we are failing at communal thanksgiving."

That's one of the things our Native sisters and brothers have tried to teach us. Thanksgiving isn't just about what we do or say on one day in the privacy of our own homes. It's about how we live together in the world: "*We* give a greeting and thanksgiving to the many supporters of our own lives," the Iroquois Confederacy says.

I'm not so sure we are very good at that collective gratitude.

When we were planning the 55th commemoration of the March on Washington back in August, we were talking about racial "equality." The Native American leader sitting next to me said: "Equality? I don't want to be equal with white folks. Look what they have done to the

land. Look what they have done with the gifts of the earth. Look what they have done to the cultures that were here before them. I don't want to be equal with them. We are better than them.”

Now this is one of those times when not hardening your heart is difficult. As one of two white people in the room, I felt pretty uncomfortable and more than a little defensive.

On the other hand, could I hear in this voice something true? Could I hear that Native peoples *had* been better at caring for the earth than my own ancestors? Could I hear him without escaping into the cultural fantasies white people have imposed on Native Americans or discounting his voice because he wasn't playing by the “equality” rules? Is there something he could teach me about the collective gratitude that made his ancestors better at caring for the earth than mine?

Could I take all this in without hardening my heart?

It's one thing to practice gratitude because it's good for my body and my soul. It's another thing to recognize that there is something at stake for the *world* if we cannot – together – cultivate a culture or a society that takes gratitude seriously. Without it, I fear the Iroquois are right: “When people cease to respect and express gratitude for these many things, then all life will be destroyed, and human life on this planet will come to an end.” Without it, our life together becomes toxic and grasping and uncaring and unsustainable.

“We might be grateful persons,” Bass writes ...

... with thankful hearts, and be fanatical about gratitude journals and intentions, but as soon as we walk out our front door or turn on the news, we are confronted with a world of payback, quid pro quo, corruption, and ungrateful neighbors ... even for those of us who live more gratefully, our personal practices and habits are at odds with the world in which we live. We are like fish swimming in a polluted river. The chances are not very good that one healthy fish can survive a

poisoned stream. We get used to toxicity ... For the good of all, we must resist.

That's where social gratitude meets social resistance. And, fortunately, one of the documented benefits of practicing gratitude is resilience. It keeps us going when we would rather give up because there is energy in knowing that there is always something to be grateful for.

So it's probably not enough to just say that we should be better at "we" gratitude.

Where do we get a chance to see it?

In the fall of 2016, something truly amazing happened. After 108 years, the Chicago Cubs won the World Series. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that "Grown men and women wept." The *Washington Post* reported: *The Cub's players and staff have grown accustomed to a strange phenomenon. Everywhere they go people come up to them with stories – of a late father, a grandfather, a mother, a grandmother, a brother, or a sister who was the biggest Cubs fan of them all. The World Series title would have meant so much to them. Almost uniformly, the interaction ends with two words: thank you. "It's a lot of gratitude," says Cubs manager Joe Maddon. "It's the same refrain from everybody. For the most part, they don't want an autograph or a picture. They just want to shake your hand and say thank you."*

Much as I love sports, it would be sad to me if the one place people experience a sense of collective gratitude is a stadium. All the more sad if it depends on the Cubs.

But this does tell me that, in everyday life, collective gratitude is possible.

As I was watching a football game in LA the other night, before the game started, the crowd was asked to take a moment of silence to

remember those who lost their lives in the fires and to give thanks for the firefighters who put their bodies on the frontline of those flames. You could hear a pin drop.

Collective gratitude is possible.

There are dangers. If collective gratitude is loving my team or my homeland so much that no one else has the right to exist, that's a problem. "Nationalism is not gratitude [Bass says] ... there's a difference between shedding a few tears during the national anthem at a baseball game and going along with the crowd at a fascist rally."

I'm guessing that gratitude feels suspect if someone says, "Thank God my house or my life was spared," when that person is standing in the middle of a block where every other house was demolished or so many other lives were lost.

Some part of us knows that gratitude is about something higher or wider or deeper than my life and my team.

By the way, did you know that there is another Thanksgiving Day? It's September 21 and it was started in Hawaii in 1965 and later adopted by the United Nations. It is "World Gratitude Day."

Thanksgiving – everywhere! [Bass says. We] should have fireworks, bands, street parties, and games – football, soccer, basketball ... Let prayers and benedictions from Christian, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Wiccans, humanists, agnostics, and atheists sound: "THANK YOU!" Let's have a great big global celebration to recognize the gift of life we share, to respond with humble thanks, and to recommit ourselves to serve nature and neighbor. Let it be a day of gratitude from every corner of the earth. Let's inaugurate that.

Maybe to see what collective gratitude looks like we need a bigger window.

For all the strange and violent imagery of the last book of the Christian scriptures, Revelation, I have always been taken by the vision of that great gathering of people from every language, tribe, and nation, feasting together, and singing together, “Glory and honor and thanks!”

Collective gratitude is possible but it will probably take a bigger window.

And like “me” gratitude, it will take practice.

When we gather here on a Sunday morning, it’s like coming together to write another page in our collective gratitude journal; to remind ourselves and each other that our lives are way more gifted than any one of us has the capacity to claim on our own; that gratitude is still possible even if, for now, for you it has to wait.

A Global Gratitude Day has to start somewhere. Let’s start practicing now.

And one of the things that will help us are these hymns we sing. I know. Sometimes they seem stodgy or old-fashioned or irrelevant. Mostly that’s true because we have lost track of the stories that produced them.

Back in the late 1500s, there was a war and a little Saxon village was under attack. The invading army surrounded the village so that inside the walls there was “... nothing but plague, famine, and fear. Eight hundred homes were destroyed, and people began dying in increasing numbers.” The pastors of the town did their best to care for people and to help bury the dead. One by one, they started to die too.

A huge ransom was demanded and one of the pastors went out to negotiate the terms. Finally, the hostility and suffering came to an end.

One historian writes: “...knowing there is no healing without thanksgiving, [pastor Martin Rinkart] wrote this hymn for the survivors:

*Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices.*

It's hard for me to imagine being that pastor, in that place, in that time, writing these words. And yet, here they are – a testimony to a kind of collective gratitude that was meant for healing in the aftermath of a terrible struggle.

I don't know what is ahead for us. I *do* know some of what we – together – have been through. And there is voice that comes down to us singing: “Now thank *we all* our God.”

And today, if you hear that voice, you know what to do.

NOTES

Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks* (HarperOne, 2018), pp.xviii-xxxvii. Iroquois Confederacy delegation to the UN in 1977 quoted by Joana Macy and Chris Johnstone in *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy* (New World Library, 2012), p.50. About the Cubs, Bass pp.114-115; about gratitude and nationalism, p.106-107; Global Gratitude Day, pp.131-132. The story of Martin Rinkart and “Now Thank We All Our God” is in Robert J. Morgan's *Then Sings My Soul* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003), p.17.