

Cycles of Struggle~Grace~Thanksgiving~
Reflections on Deuteronomy 26:1-11 & Philippians 4:6
Thanksgiving Sunday October 10, 2010
Trinity United Ottawa
Rev. Ellie Barrington, M.Div.

We who live in this land where the trees light up in the Fall, so immediately give thanks for the Beauty of God's Creation. We who live today, in this land of milk and honey, where the earth overflows into our pumpkin pie and stuffing, we so naturally appreciate nature's bountiful cycle of winter fallow, spring seed, summertime growth, and fall harvest.

At the time of year when our land bears food aplenty, we, as most humans, instinctively take a moment to give thanks to the Source of all abundance - to the creative, creating God. We Christians are doing today as our Hebrew ancestors did since ancient times. That thanksgiving harvest procession, laid out in Deuteronomy, with scripted words and liturgical actions, was a tradition long before it was written down in the 7th Century B.C.E. It always happened at the first of the two Mediterranean harvest festivals, the Feast of Weeks, when the Spring grain came in.

What is so notable about this thanksgiving ritual, is that it doesn't just give thanks for the food and harvest of the day. It ritually remembers that defining story in Hebrew history, when the people were wandering Armeans, redeemed from alienation, hunger and slavery in Egypt and by God's grace, but lost on their way to the promised land of milk and honey, where they longed to belong and be fed. The thanks-giving procession began as a pilgrimage, a ritual re-entry to the Promised Land.

At each harvest time, the people are assured by this ritual reminder that times of struggle, hunger, loss and alienation **will** be supplanted by belonging, plenty and joy. In times of poor harvest or at times when they find themselves, once again, aliens in a strange land, this thanksgiving story fuels hope, reminding them of the cycles of history and nature, to have faith, that good times will come round again. God will

lead us home once again - as surely as Fall follows Summer.

And in times of homeland, abundant harvest and food security, the ritual clearly reminds the people to extend hospitality to those immigrants and refugees and others who dwell among them. They who were themselves once 'aliens', would surely reach out to today's aliens with compassion.

The Deuteronomy thanksgiving ritual situates **us** too, within the repeating cycles of struggle and deliverance by God's saving grace. When we are in 'grace times' and Graceland, we are reminded to include those nearby who feel lonely and alienated, lost or hungry. We notice - who is in a struggling place in the cycle of their life? We include some today through our giving to the food bank. Others through invitations to Thanksgiving dinners. Others in our prayers of thanks and giving with a global reach.

When we are the one struggling - perhaps the one who feels alienated by all the Thanksgiving joy and companionship around us - we too can be reminded, to give thanks still. To give thanks always. Because our prayerful shift into Thanksgiving will surely bring us in touch with some spot of God's grace. If we regularly stay our minds on God in grateful prayer - even when life feels lousy - as surely as Spring follows Winter, we will learn to perceive the first fruits of Creation's abundance growing in us, around us, for us. Those who give thanks are the first to notice when the trees start lighting up in yellows and oranges and reds. **Because giving thanks sensitizes us to God's grace.**

I won't exhort you to "Be thankful!" I know that would be counterproductive, because thankfulness is felt, not commanded. It is a mindshift you can feel in your body. But I can tell you about my thankfulness practise and encourage you to share yours with each other.

A year or two ago, at Thanksgiving, we distributed little notebooks called Daily Gratitude Journals. Remember? Did you try it? I know that lots of you have your

own rituals of thankful prayer. Anyway, I kept my little journal up till it was full and then forgot it. But during my sabbatical, Bob and I made it a practise to share five 'gratitudes' each, at night just before we fall asleep. We alternate, mining our days for the good stuff and thanking God. We even do it on the phone sometimes when he's travelling.

Some nights, we go over our five each, overflowing with easy gratitude. But not every day! A week or so ago, over dinner, I was grumbling my litany of the events of a bad day, when Bob quipped: "Doing Gratitudes tonight should be fun!"

He had to kickstart our gratitudes at bedtime. I was not in the mood. But his examples cued me to dig for the best in my bad day. Reminded by our ritual of a better state of mind, I went through a shift into a more appreciative mode. I slipped out of my self centred grumbling ego and into a wider expanse of Spirit. I felt my gratefulness, as the gifts of the day became visible. I realized, almost with a laugh, that the day's difficult events had taught me something useful. There were already 'first fruits' to be harvested from a day that felt like....compost.

Even at times when I feel like an alien, our ritual of 'doing our gratitudes', can open me up to glimpse something that God is growing in the soil of me. So this Thanks-giving, I'm giving thanks for the ancient Judeo-Christian ritual of giving thanks to God in all things, in all times. Because it sensitizes me to see God's creating, bountiful Presence, a gift of healing grace in all our lives.

Know that the Creator always yearns to save the people from struggle, loss and suffering. God will bring us all back to the land of milk and honey, just as surely as the harvest season returns, in all its resplendent colours and abundant plenty.

Thanks be to the Creator! And Happy Thanks-giving!

Let's sing "We Plough the Fields and Gather" In Voices United at # 520