

Present Your Requests

Stanton Reformed Church

November 24, 2019

Focus: the Israelites presented their offerings to god as a way to say thanks; generations later they presented not only gifts of thanks but their petitions and prayers, their selves.

Function: we can bring our whole selves as an offering, thanks and prayers.

Do/think: bring it all to god in thanks

This morning I've got a tale of three cities, or three worshiping communities.

Go back with me, way back, the first community is the Hebrew people who have finally arrived in the promised land.

It's hard to imagine what they were feeling - they had traveled so long. Were they Relieved? Skeptical? Hopeful?

One thing we know they were was Thankful.

Our text today describes a ritual of thanksgiving, a ritual of blessing.

Their ritual went like this...

They brought some of their early produce to the place of worship.

And when they presented their offering, they were to make a declaration of how they got there.

They said something like, We came from migrants who were enslaved.

Our ancestors cried out to God.

And God heard them.

And now here we are... we have made it to the land that God promised to our ancestors.

Thank you God. We are blessed and we bless you. Thankyou for bringing us this far. For guiding us. For providing for us. For protecting us and caring for us. Thank you. Bless you.

Here is my gift of thanks some of my early produce. The first of my crop.

Sometimes this gift is called "first fruits." It is not the leftovers. Their gift of thanks was not from their discretionary income.

They didn't wait until they had already paid their bills or satisfied their creditors or made their million.

The first fruit, the early crop went to God.

They shared their story, they gave their gift of thanks, they bowed down and then they celebrated together - All of them, their families and the foreigners, immigrants among them.

That's the first community and how they gave thanks.

Now, the second community... jump with me generations into the future.

Now we are in Philippi. A community of diverse people - Jewish people and Gentile believers who lived in a town in Asia Minor.

The Apostle Paul had pulled this group of people together and they were becoming a community.

They had not traveled in the desert together, they were not headed toward a particular promise together.

This community was instead forming itself around the idea of Jesus' gift of grace and freedom.

But it seems their community was rife with disagreements. Earlier in the letter we read

there was fighting; they were not all getting along.

The exact nature of the argument is unknown but Paul knows that disunity can be devastating to a community.

So Paul turns to his roots, the ritual of giving thanks... but with a twist.

He creates an augmented ritual:

Rejoice.

Be gentle

Do not worry

Present - ready for it...

present your requests and petitions to god...

with your thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving is the word Eucharist and this is the translated word for blessing, Berakah in the Hebrew which is to say... Paul was drawing from this ancient ritual of thanksgiving or blessing.

Remember Paul is an educated Jewish scholar, he knows what it means to give thanks.

Paul wants this kind of thankfulness, blessing for them.

But at the same time, what I hear in the few verses we read was him acknowledging that there is more they must bring to god than their gift of thanks, their offering.

They were anxious, they were fighting. There were disagreements. They must bring those prayers and petitions to god too.

So Paul suggests a ritual, not unlike the one his ancestors had.

Rejoice.

Be gentle

Do not worry

Present - ready for it...

present your requests and petitions to god...
with your thanksgiving.

Listen to that last line again -

Pray. Petition God along with thanksgiving.

This may sound simple to us but this idea of praying and petitioning along with a gift of thanksgiving is not what his ancestors had passed down to him.

He's saying don't just bring your first fruits..
don't just bring an offering to bid... Bring yourselves too.

In particular... pray for your community... for the disagreements, the unity, the concerns among you,
Bring your concerns, your worries, your irritations, your fears, your pain and sadness.

That's the second community and how they gave thanks.

Now to our third community...

Picture with me, 1783... here. this lot of land where we sit today.

We recently found our articles of incorporation - and when I say we, I mean Melody Landon Simerson, our resident librarian, researched for the Finance committee who needed to produce them for our bank.

236 years ago was the first mention of churches in the area forming another community here on this corner.

Imagine when the walls were built. Imagine how they traveled in the morning to meet together.

Imagine what their children were like.

I wonder who sat exactly where you are sitting today?

How many cups of coffee or tea have been served here? Hundreds, thousands?

As best as I can calculate, communion has been shared about 2800 times here.

Given our history, our ancestry right in this place, how would we engage in this ritual of thanks? Of blessing god. Because we have been blessed.

Our people were settlers...
they immigrated in hopes for a better life...
they gathered in worship together,
They trusted you, o God.
And now here we are...
we benefit from a long line of faithful
worshippers.
So now we give to you our gifts of thanks.

Thank you God. Bless you.

It is not from the leftovers. It is not part of my discretionary income. It is a thoughtful part of the produce of my life.

And along with my gift of thanks, here are my petitions, my prayers, my concerns, my joys.

Here we are.. all of us, even our disagreements, our arguments, our confusion and concerns.

We bring it all, to you, God.

Is that something we can get behind?

This is full body worship in a way.

I mean... We don't bring our thanks in baskets of produce or meat.

Some of us write checks, some cash. About half of our congregation gives thanks online.

What I'm asking I suppose is, Have we lost this ritual of giving thanks? Of blessing?

Have we instead thought of our offering as a way to pay the church bills? Or do our part?

Have we thought of our prayer time as a way to pray for others and not how we pray for us as a community?

The tale of three communities...

One entering the promised land... giving thanks.

Another working out differences and arguments... giving thanks.

And us.. Today...

Let us also recount the blessings of God,
Let us give of our firstfruits.
Let us be honest in our petition and prayers.
Bringing our whole selves to God.

Amen.