

## ***Grateful for a Land of Milk and Honey***

**Deuteronomy 26:1-15**

The early winter chill entering Thanksgiving week is a bit colder today for those who live in the town of Washington, Illinois. For an annual holiday defined by traditional images of hearth and home, I imagine solemn irony could better characterize the spirit there when families gather to share a Thanksgiving meal on Thursday.

This town, of course, was one of many in Illinois and throughout the upper Midwest that were ravaged by the severe tornadoes just one week ago. It's late in the year for such a line of strong storms to cross the landscape and level entire neighborhoods and communities, splintering homes and households with injuries and multiple deaths left in their wake. Though people always heed the warning sirens, something like this is unexpected; generations may come and go before storms of this magnitude would ever devastate a particular location. And it's even rarer to wake up on a mid-November morning long after the first frost and find yourself homeless by nightfall and exposed to the harsher elements of nature.

By Thanksgiving time, a kinder, gentler relationship with Mother Nature is the norm for the farming communities of this region—the heartland of our country where a symbiotic bond with the earth translates into the face of God every Sunday worshipped by endless congregations of the faithful, who bless the Lord for the seasonal rains and abundant sunshine that produce the harvest of their fields. This is a place where religious faith runs deep, as deep as the roots of every plant and family lineage in soil that has been coveted and inherited for generations.

So in the wake of this trauma, it would be reasonable to presume that today at least some people across the upper Midwest are suffering a crisis of faith as they struggle to count their blessings amidst their tears. In Washington and surrounding towns they may rightfully ask: Who of us has a *home* in which to gather? Who has a reason to be thankful when so much has been lost—where, as the Psalmist writes, “our tears are our daily food...”?

However, I think we’d be mistaken if we were to assume there are no words of gratitude to express. In the aftermath of such tremendous suffering and loss, families and congregations gather in churches, synagogues, mosques, and other houses of worship to give thanks. Yes, they and their neighbors have had their lives turned upside down; indeed, it will be expensive to rebuild and recover from the storms. Much of what they had will never be replaced. But I imagine that even in settings where roofs and walls no longer exist, there is deep conviction of belief—of genuine appreciation and love for the God who preserved their lives, protected their loved ones, and who will give them another opportunity at life and the strength to go on.

I can make that claim because people of genuine faith—of deep, abiding, trusting faith—are less likely to give up on the relationship they have with the Lord of their lives anymore than they would dismiss the importance of their own kin and community in times of crisis. They realize that the God they love and worship isn’t merely found in the avoidance of suffering or only in the positive experiences of life. Like the love and care of friends and family, the presence of God is important in every moment—the good and the bad, the

hardships and the pleasant memories. Those who don't grasp the value of such a relationship with a creating and sustaining Presence will often turn to blame and bitterness to deal with their grief and sorrow over loss; in their spiritual isolation, they are the likely to turn cynical and scornful of religious faith. But those who gain their spiritual strength from such loving relationships will turn to sources of care and kindness to see them through the hardship. The relationship itself will draw them closer to the value and meaning of it in times of difficulty—it has been, and will continue to be, a love that will not let them go—a love that is divine and human alike.

This is what I admire about people of genuine faith, regardless of their religious background or tradition. Instead of giving up hope and trust, the grief and sorrow will lead them back toward the heart of God and to those around them because they seek such love when there is so much pain to bear. Echoing the words of the Apostle Paul: “I know what it is like to have plenty; I know what it is like to have nothing. I can do all things through God who strengthens me.”

Their daily lives offer an enduring testimony: Why give up on that which has given you so much already, especially when you need it most? When you are at a loss, that's when faith can be meaningful to help you through the toughest of times. That's when you sing the beloved songs of the faith. Rather than become overwhelmed and despairing, those of deep faith will begin again to look for and count the blessings that come with each new day (“Morning by morning new mercies I see...”), enabling them to sense the hand of God in the kindnesses that each person, neighbors and strangers alike, offer and every good turn provides. The encouragement they receive from

those who share their suffering and help carry their burdens gives them what they yearn for to keep moving forward. They will rebuild and return to their land; they are certain they'll find a way through the heart of darkness simply because it is, and has been, a land of milk and honey for their lives from one generation to another.

“A land of milk and honey”—language lifted from the pages of Scripture and the Exodus story, in reference to what Israel deeply desired while struggling to survive in a foreign land through slavery and harsh treatment. A land of milk and honey was an image of a place for Israel to settle and prosper from their own labor as shepherds and as farmers—a description that came to be associated with a specific geographical territory, i.e., Canaan or the region that stretches from Lebanon in the north down through modern-day Israel and Palestine. This, of course, is a prized portion of the Fertile Crescent in the Middle East where, throughout history, both farmers and shepherds have flourished, regardless of who occupied the region.

As much as wars have been fought throughout the millennia over this parcel of land, in truth, the idyllic imagery of a place of “milk and honey” is meant to be more allegorical than geographical. It refers to any pastoral setting where animals are tended and fields are planted and produce crops year after year. It is an image of fertility and flourishing—a place to settle (wherever it might be) where life can be good and generation after generation can establish their identity and their familial roots.

What strikes me about today's text from Deuteronomy is that it's presented not as an ownership claim upon a specific territory, but

instead as a liturgy of sorts to give thanks for what any land produces for them in God's good graces. It doesn't define geographically what they are to possess, as if there is only one place where they could flourish; instead, it highlights their spirit of thanksgiving for receiving the bounty from their labors—that wherever they settle, God would bless them with milk and honey.

Gratitude for a land of milk and honey—having a place to settle in freedom and to prosper from one's labor—was expressed by a thanksgiving offering, which were to be the first fruits of their harvest and the firstborn of their herds. They were to return the first portions of what they had been blessed with in an offering to the Levites, foreigners, the orphans and the widows—those who did not possess property of their own or who were subject to the charity of others because of being itinerant or in a vulnerable and fragile state in life.

This offering, which is still a central part of the Festival of Weeks (or Shavuot) in Judaism, was instituted as a religious discipline to be fulfilled even in the years when war and famine destroyed their land and livelihood. It was offered as a sign of remembrance, respect, and humility among Israelites, recognizing that everything they produced and every crop that yielded was not theirs alone to possess, but something they received from Nature's seasons and the grace of God—that even when those losses were great, what they reaped and tended was still to be shared with those who lived among them. Before they would benefit themselves from their labor, they would remember the commandment of God to give first to those in need. The offering of firstfruits from the field and firstborn from their flocks kept them mindful of those who were not

as fortunate as they were and also of the time when they were slaves in Egypt and all of the benefits of their labor went to their masters. Furthermore, it called to mind that their survival as people resulted from their ongoing dependence upon what the earth delivered to them in a given season, as well as the importance to share generously with their neighbors.

The thanksgiving offering was comprehensive in terms of its intent and meaning for Israelites—it was their declaration of their place in the grander scheme of things—where they stood in the world under God. It's what gave them the perspective that they were only caretakers and managers, not owners or possessors, of that which God had given to them. The land would take care of them if they took care of the land; their people would survive as long as they took care of their people. Giving up the very first benefits and blessings of their labor for God and for others was a spiritual reality check that they were servants, not masters, of their world and all that which God has given them. Being humbly grateful for a land of milk and honey was what spiritually grounded them, individually and collectively, in a proper relationship with God, their people, and the earth which provided their daily bread.

As I consider the meaning of thanksgiving in this ancient context, it seems to me that, ironically, the ones who might fully embrace it are those who have suffered a great loss—those who recognize how fragile life on this planet is and how fleeting are our days. Those who can appreciate the blessings that come far too easily to us in this generation are those who don't take them for granted—who realize that hearth and home, food to share and people to gather

around their table are all gifts of life—mercies that we enjoy and can lose in a moment's time.

That grateful outlook is what genuine faith inspires—a proper perspective of what our place is, as human beings, in this universe and in each other's lives. We have a symbiotic relationship with the earth and all things living and we flourish as we take care of that which takes care of us. We pay forward to those presently in need the first fruits (not the leftovers) of what we have been blessed with, so that they may receive our best effort—that we put them before ourselves—so that they may recover and do well, and that we may find a similar mercy in our own times of loss and want. By the thanksgiving offerings of our lives—both material and spiritual—we take care of each other on this planet and of the earth that provides for our daily needs so that we may all survive for yet another generation and, in God's will, for many more beyond that.

As Wendy and I gather at our Thanksgiving meal on Thursday with family and friends sitting around her parents' table, I will offer a prayer of gratitude for all of life's blessings and for the meal we are about to enjoy. Though each year has its sorrows and disappointments, setbacks and worries, I will ask each one to offer a reason for why they are grateful. I will try to remember many of my fellow Americans, and so many more around the world, who lack shelter in a season turning cold, or no home to call their own, or little food to share, and many griefs to bear. I will hope in that moment to embrace the purpose of thanksgiving—that we will give the best we have to others before we consider our own needs, that we will thank those who have made this meal possible and the hands that have

labored to prepare it, and to bless the Lord of our lives, who has generously and graciously given us this time to enjoy in abundance or in want:

Be present at our table, Lord;  
Be here, and everywhere adored;  
Thy mercies bless and grant that we  
May feast in fellowship with Thee.  
Amen.

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