

Thanksgiving – 2024
Deuteronomy 8:1-10
Philippians 4:6-20
Luke 17:11-19

Do you feel like this land belongs to you? As an American, do you believe that this land is your land, this land is my land, from California to the New York Island? From the redwood forests to the Gulf Stream waters – this land was made for you and me. Do you like that song? Do you feel the way that Arlo Guthrie felt when he wrote that song? I totally feel like this land is my land. Why is that?

I teach about creation to the preschoolers and the kindergarteners as the academic year begins. I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. It's a two-part lesson as I visit each classroom. First, we go outside and I ask simple, leading questions. What's that blue stuff called that's everywhere up high? They are good at guessing. I describe animals, the ocean, marine life, rainbows, the sun, moon and stars – they always answer right. I eventually ask them, where did all that stuff come from? That's the first part. Then when go back inside and I have them look around their classroom, asking "who put this room together?" Miss Julie! Miss Bella! Miss Erin! Who did Miss Julie put this room together for? For me? No. Did Miss Julie put this room together for LeBron James? No. Did Miss Julie put this room together for SpongeBob SquarePants? Giggle. No! Silly, Pastor! Who did Miss Julie put this room together for? For us! Whose room is this? It's our room. Whose world is this? Yes, this is God's world. Who did He make it for?

No doubt, this is God's world. No doubt, He didn't make it for Himself. This is our land. We didn't have to sign a lease. He didn't require a security deposit. How easy is it to apply these words to us: "For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing out in the valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper" (Deuteronomy 8:7-9). Provision; God's abundant provision; this world was made for us. This world was beautifully, lovingly made for us. The creatures that we are and this physical world is a match made in heaven. "And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land he has given you" (Deuteronomy 8:10).

That last verse is likely what Abraham Lincoln had in mind when he declared a national day of Thanksgiving in 1863. 1863! In the midst of a bloody and heart-wrenching civil war, Lincoln wrote these words about the fruitful land in which we abide: **"No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Highest God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy. It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and voice by the whole American people."** Lincoln proposed a Day of Thanksgiving in the midst of a civil war. This land is your land. You have more than land though, don't you? None of us actually "own" land, do we? We inhabit it, we work it, we enjoy it, but we don't actually "own" it. We are stewards. The better we take care of it the more enjoyment we harvest from it. What leads you to take good care of

something? Does love, gratitude, and a sense of responsibility lead you to take good care of something? Gratitude; I've often heard that grateful people are happier people. Gratitude, Thanksgiving gratitude, is either directed to God or it is not directed anywhere real.

What kind of a dining partner do you suppose the cleansed leper would have been at a Thanksgiving feast? Does gratitude make for a pleasant person, an engaging and sunny person? What kind of a dining partner are you? Would you like to be able to see through the eyes of the cleansed leper as you sit down to dinner tomorrow? He had been miserable. Socially isolated, his body was rotting while he was still in it. A cruel disease, leprosy was a death sentence, an untreatable horror. "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us" (Luke 17:14). Ten of them cried in unison, a choir of deplorables lifting their voice to the Good Physician. Mercy – that's what they cried for. Their situation was hopeless. But hope was on the rise in Judea, in Galilee, wherever Christ walked on His way to the cross. Stories of healing had no doubt reached these men struggling with life, struggling with death.

Pay attention to the dialogue. "When [Jesus] saw them he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests'" (Luke 17:14). Lepers were necessarily excluded from the worship life of Israel. They had to shout "unclean" whenever they got close to someone. Because of their disease, they were genuinely a threat to others. Have you ever felt excluded from God, excluded from grace, excluded from all that is holy? It's a natural feeling. You're a sinner, like me. Sin has a repercussion in our conscience, in our heart. It hurts. Our sin hurts us and it hurts others – sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly. Intuitively we know that our sin alienates us from God.

The dialogue; Jesus was directing them to those who would allow them to reenter that worship life. "Go and show yourselves to the priests" was a promise, a verbal prelude to a thorough physical healing. Why would they show themselves to the priests if nothing was going to change? Those whose bodies were decomposing while they were still in them experienced a something as close to a resurrection as you can get in this life. Can you imagine the shouts? Ten deplorables were changed as they walked on the way to the priests; a miracle; an epiphany; who is this? The Samaritan knew. When Peter saw the great catch of fish, he knew who Jesus was. When the disciples were in the boat, perishing because of a storm and Jesus spoke a word to calm the sea, calm the storm, they knew. When the paralyzed man was told to get up, take his mat and go home, he knew who it was who healed him. The one leper raced back to Jesus because that leper knew. The Samaritan leper's worship began and ended at Jesus' feet. The Samaritan leper's gratitude began and ended at Jesus' feet. "O give thanks unto the Lord for He is good, and His mercy endures forever." Why go to the priests when God Himself has visited His people and He is standing right over there? Jesus is our great High Priest. Why go the Temple when One greater than the Temple is here? One either thanks the Lord Christ for all that we are and all that we have or one is engaged in a charade, an empty husk of a gesture.

"Then Jesus answered, 'Were not ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?'" (Luke 17:17). Are you thankful? How does it show? What have you been given? Life is a pretty extraordinary gift, wouldn't you say? When we say that we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, we are remembering that God breathed into Adam the breath of life. God's breath is God's Spirit. The Scriptures are God-breathed. When Jesus appeared to the disciples on Easter, He breathed on them and said:

“Receive the Holy Spirit” then He commissioned them to forgive sins. When you were baptized into Jesus death and resurrection you received the Holy Spirit, you became a temple of the Holy Spirit. These are some pretty spectacular gifts, wouldn’t you say? Are you thankful? “And [Jesus] said to him, ‘Rise and go your way; your faith has saved you’” (Luke 17:19). I’m not paraphrasing. I’m not taking homiletical license with the text, that is literally what it says, ‘your faith has saved you.’ That is you.

My sins have been forgiven. The blood of Christ was shed to deliver me from judgment, from hell. You are a beloved daughter, a beloved son of the Most High. His grace envelops you wherever you go. This world has been given to you as a gift, as provision for your life. It is a Father’s gift, a gift of love. The premier gift from your Father is His only-begotten Son. He died for you. He took away your shame, your guilt and your death. He bore the leprosy of our sin on the cross and our Father punished sin in His Son. That’s how He heals. Faith in that crucified Messiah saves us, heals us, makes us well. Gratitude is simply the product of that wonderful reality breaking in on your mind, your heart. It is a delight to be in the company of grateful people. It’s like being in church. In this place we are each other’s dining partners. There is no banquet like the one that is served here – Christ’s body and blood. This land is your land – a gift of Christ the King.