

Sermon – Thanksgiving 2019 – St Luke and St Matthew, Brooklyn

Luke 23: 33-43

Each and every Sunday we gather in this beautiful house of prayer, built for us by the generosity of our past members, and give thanks to God. The liturgy of the Holy Eucharist that we celebrate in this place is called the Great Thanksgiving. In it we recall the way God has revealed God's-self to the world since creation and the generosity of God's redeeming nature that saves us from the abyss.

The greatest revelation of God was through his son Jesus. God came into the world in human flesh, born of Mary in a cow shed by candlelight. Through Jesus Christ we have been reconciled to God, been forgiven our sins and offences and saved from a life absent of the true love of God, whose inclusive embrace assures us that there is hope for redemption in this broken world.

Today we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King and our Thanksgiving Sunday. The Feast of Christ the King is celebrated on the last Sunday after Pentecost, when we arrive at the threshold of a new liturgical year, that begins next week with the season of Advent.

We remember Christ as King, the epitome of the just king in the form of the benevolent King David. We recall the mockery Jesus endured in his last hours as he was crowned with a crown of thorns, spat upon and beaten. We recall the plate nailed to that old wooden cross – “This is the King of the Jews.”

The King. The messiah. It wasn't however supposed to work out the way it did. The messiah was to come with great might and power and save the world by banishing evil, and those that evil had enslaved. Little did his followers appreciate that in Jesus darkest hour, his might and power was revealed to all in his suffering and death. His might and power touched the weakest even in his final minutes of life. How we all might cry out the same words as one of his co-accused, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.”

The full arc of Jesus life has been recalled for us this past year in our liturgies. His life was extraordinary and as such, should be at the center of our Thanksgiving remembrances and celebrations. For all that we are, and all that we have, and all that we give, comes from God. All that we know about our salvation from this decaying world comes through his son Jesus Christ.

Through faith in Christ we become endowed with a generous heart, a loving embrace, a just and merciful soul and a forgiving and healing nature. We become the instruments of God's love in the world and so our generosity becomes a reflection of how we live out this blessing.

Today, the parish leadership asks that you make a personal commitment to the work of God, through Jesus Christ in this church and in the world that starts with our neighborhood. Jesus asks us to commit to sharing some of the blessings we have received to ensure the health of this church community and to ensure others continue to hear of the great message of hope that flows freely through God's never-ending grace.

Generosity isn't something that just happens. Generosity is something that has to be nurtured within us, so that we learn to give freely without condition and without fear that we might not have enough for ourselves. Generosity is not just a virtue of this contemporary world. It can be found in ancient cultures. Our Christian principle of tithing, the retention of 90% of God's gifts to us, comes from the time of Abraham, when he gave a tenth of what he had after King Melchizedek blessed him as he was returning from rescuing Lot.

Andy Clarke reminded me yesterday of the generosity of the ancient Israelites as recorded in the second book of Chronicles, Chapter 31. After King Hezekiah, one of the good kings, demonstrated his own generosity by providing the necessary sacrifices from his bounty, he asked that the community also provide a tithe to support the priests and the Levites, who did not have land. Andy reminded me the Levites were the temple singers. I think it was a well-timed plug that important funding is needed here for the new organist and choir.

I am a firm believer that we have much to learn from history and especially from history that is the revelation from God contained in our scripture. Many indigenous cultures existed well before Abraham's time and they too have many things to teach us from their culture. One such teaching is the need for generosity.

The Episcopal Church has an active ministry to the Lakota people, one of the three Sioux tribes from the Great Plains, now North and South Dakota. I have come to know the priest in charge of Cheyenne River Episcopal Ministries, Rev Margaret Watson. One of the ministries that I support with a part of my tithe is a feeding program at St John's Eagle Butte, on the Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota.

The Lakota people list generosity as one of the twelve virtues of being Lakota. It is called *Canneyuke* (can-te-you-keh) or *has a heart*. As with most indigenous peoples these virtues are handed down through storytelling and I'd like to share briefly one of their stories.

It was winter and food was scarce within the community. The elders decided that they would send their two best hunters deep into the forest to hunt for deer while the others would forage closer to their camp. See the Bear and Left Hand were selected to try and snare a deer in the deep forest. They set out in snowshoes and walked for many days and nights but were unable to locate tracks of a deer. They were running out of food themselves surviving on small strips of dried rabbit.

Each night they would camp in the snow, huddled by a small fire. The end was near as their strength waned. When they woke one morning a deer came crashing through the thicket and fell into a snow filled gully. The two hunters couldn't believe their good fortune and rushed to draw their bows and kill the deer before it escaped.

When the deer's last breath drifted into the cold air, See the Bear and Left Hand pondered their luck. They trussed up the deer carcass and started out dragging it back through thick snow to the camp. Two days into their journey they came across a skinny coyote that asked them for food because the winter had been harsh for him as well. Left Hand stated the obvious that winter was a time of hunger and they couldn't share their deer as their community was hungry too and expected

the full carcass. See the Bear though felt compassion and cut off strips of meat and gave it to the coyote. Left Hand was not happy.

A few days later a flock of magpies settled in the trees above them and asked for some of the meat to feed their young. Left Hand reiterated what he had told the coyote and refused to give them any of their meat. Again See the Bear felt empathy for their plight and cut off some meat, not acknowledging the refrain of displeasure from Left Hand. A few days later it was a wolf and then a fox. Each time Left Hand objected but See the Bear cut off more meat from the shrinking carcass.

Finally a hawk came to visit them seeking food. Left Hand had enough and stormed off to the village to tell them what was happening and to warn them that See the Bear was giving away their much-needed meat. After Left Hand departed See the Bear gave some meat to the hawk who in turn suggested to See the Bear that they might find more plentiful food in the nearby lake country. Thankful for the advice See the Bear lugged what remained of the carcass back to the edge of the camp and stuffed it behind a tree, then went to confront the elders.

The elders asked him for his side of the story and he told them the truth. The elders were disappointed that the carcass would be smaller than needed but acknowledged the advice that food could be more plentiful in the Lake country as the hawk had suggested. So they went to fetch what remained of the carcass and were shocked to find that a full carcass was found behind the tree. Left Hand could not believe what he was witnessing. "I saw it being cut up and given away" he exclaimed!

As the elders and others stood with the carcass a ghostly white image of a large deer appeared before them. The deer said, "I am the deer that live in the forest. There are many of us and our flesh will give you strength. We ask that in return you always show your gratefulness for the gift of our life. If you do this we will always be here to help you. Generosity is a good thing to have for we are all travellers on this earth."

From then on after each deer was killed the hunters would pause for a quiet moment and then they would lay down a bundle of sacred sage as an offering. This practice continues to this day.

Jesus could be the ghost of the deer, offering us his flesh as strength. He has showed us through the Eucharistic meal what it means to pause and to reflect in the quietness of our hearts on what he has done for us by laying down his life for our freedom. Jesus became the scapegoat that the community wanted exiled for the threats they felt to their way of life. Left Hand wanted See the Bear identified as the person who gave away the much-needed meat.

The mainstream community of Jesus' day was so caught up in the rituals of life that they missed the opportunity to be generous of spirit. The blessings that Jesus taught his early followers were threatening to many and may continue to be so in our modern world. Despite this, we are called to model living with a generous heart.

As you ponder your own generous heart this morning and later this week at Thanksgiving meals, prayerfully reflect on how God is sharing the bounty of living in freedom and forgiveness with you. See if you can put aside some time to reflect deeply on how God has blessed you this year, how

God may be calling you to share those blessings with others through a generous heart and how God continues to bring you out of exile and into the Promised Land.

May God's grace fill you, and may we be thankful and generous today and every day hereafter.

Amen