

**Sermon: "Offering Thanks in Times of Despair."  
Interfaith Thanksgiving Service  
Sunday, November 20, 2011  
The Rev. Peter Faass  
Delivered at Heights Christian Church, Shaker Heights  
Deuteronomy 8:7-18; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15**

Those of you who are Facebook members – or as the case may be Facebook junkies like me – have most likely noticed the increase of poster-like graphics and photographs that have appeared all over the Home page lately. I had a friend recently post the following: "Hey, what's with all the posters on FB all of a sudden? It's beginning to look like my old college dorm room!" Now that's a powerful memory I can identify with.

I'm still undecided if the abundance of all this poster art is a boon or a bane to Facebook's look, but since my last name is Faass and not Zuckerberg, I suspect that I have very little say in the matter.

Having said that, there was one particular poster of a Thanksgiving cartoon posted this past Monday that gave me a really good laugh. The cartoon depicted a Thanksgiving turkey and Santa Claus. Behind them there is a calendar with the month of November showing. The turkey is clearly all riled up by Santa's presence. "Hey! Hey!" the turkey yells at a startled Santa, "November is my month. What are you doing here? Oh! Wait! Wait! No, it's okay Santa you can stay. That's fine. Take November!"

Clearly the turkey has good reason to want to abdicate the month of November to the jolly old elf of December. Having the craziness of December's secular Christmas celebration take over November may just be the reprieve the turkey is looking for, so he doesn't end up being the entrée at Thanksgiving dinner.

Considering the number of big retailers opening on Thanksgiving night this year for holiday shopping, the turkey may get that reprieve yet.

Unlike the turkey I am not so eager to relinquish November – and certainly not Thanksgiving Day – over to December. There is too much at stake, too much of value in our national month ostensibly dedicated to giving thanks, to see it become subsumed by our national month dedicated to crazed consumerism.

Giving thanks is something we need to do more of, not less. As a person of faith I passionately believe that the primary purpose for which we are created by God is first and foremost to give thanks, offering gratitude for the precious gift of our creation and for the innumerable blessings God provides us.

It is our vocation.

Giving thanks is our end of the various covenants that God has entered into with us through people like Moses and Jesus.

In the book of Deuteronomy Moses conveys the Law to the Israelites. He begins with the Shema, which is the foundational statement of faith for the Hebrew people. Its opening words proclaim, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." (Deut. 6:4-5)

In the Gospel of Mark, when Jesus is asked which commandment is the greatest of all, he draws upon his Jewish faith and the Shema to answer the question. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one," he replied. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."

From Moses and Jesus we understand that loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength is what God desires of us in our relationship with God. Loving God is first and foremost what it means to be a thanksgiving people.

Being a thanksgiving people is challenging work even in the best of times. It can be downright daunting during times of great despair.

I suspect that it's not a revelation to you when I say that we currently live in such a time of despair and growing despondency in our nation.

The landscape of American society since the great recession began several years ago is for many of our citizens a bleak wilderness, where finding things to be thankful for seems like an increasingly futile endeavor.

As we approach our national day of thanks this week, we do so in the context of an economy that spurts and sputters along, a looming dread that the deteriorating financial status of the middle class and the poor is a permanent reality, and with an unemployment rate that stubbornly refuses to drop below 9%; a figure which doesn't even factor in those who are no longer counted, those who have removed themselves from the job marketplace and those who are under-employed or working multiple jobs to eek out a living.

Add to these economic issues the growing threat to the social safety net that provides some security to the most at risk and vulnerable, two un-resolved wars and feckless leaders who are so co-opted by corporations and Wall St. that they are unable or unwilling to lead us out of the morass we are in. It's no wonder the American people are struggling to articulate something to be thankful for this Thanksgiving. For many, to recite a litany of thanksgivings at this point of time in our nations life seems Panglossian in the extreme.

Yet give thanks we must. Giving thanks is especially to be our vocation during dire times. C.S. Lewis once observed that, "We ought to give thanks for all fortune: if it is 'good,' because it is good, if bad because it works in us patience, humility and . . . the hope of our eternal country."

Lewis' wisdom is seen in the experience of Moses and the Hebrew people in our passage from Deuteronomy today. After arduously wandering in the mother of all wildernesses for forty years the people are on the cusp of entering that better land of milk and honey. During those years of wilderness the people repeatedly experienced times of doubt, despair, rebellion and hopelessness. Through manna, quails, water from the rock and steady, faithful leadership God provided for the people's basic needs, while always keeping their focus on the promise of the good land that lay before them; a place which the text describes as, "a land flowing streams . . . of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees . . . a land where you will lack nothing." God kept the people's focus by never allowing them to forget that in their covenantal relationship they were always to be a thanksgiving people, loving God with all their heart, soul, and strength. The object lessons to be learned by us from Israel's wilderness experience are many. Here are two that can sustain our call to thankfulness during these challenging times.

The first lesson is that of all the essential things we need for life, things like food, water, shelter and clothing, the most important of all for our health and wellbeing is found in the word of God and our trust in God's word that a better land always lays before us. As I often tell my congregation, with God the best is always yet to come.

Yet many people believe that God has abandoned them when they encounter difficult times. In response they abandon their relationship with God, instead turning to idols to guide them – or at least anesthetize them - in times of despair. That is a fallacy. It was so for Israel in the wilderness and it is equally false for us today.

In remaining faithful to our call to be a thanksgiving people we bring hope to people in despair. Our thanksgivings in the face of despair are a potent reminder of God's eternal promise to guide us through the current wilderness we find ourselves in. As Moses told the Hebrews, we must never forget the Lord our God.

The second lesson is that there is more to be learned about ourselves in times of trial and deprivation than we will ever learn in times of fatness and abundance. The wilderness, despite all of its hazards, provides a testing ground for our character. It is a refiner's fire.

If there is one aspect of our national character that is being severely tested during our current wilderness period it is the character of our generosity toward those who are most affected by the collateral damage of the wilderness we are in. We will not experience the fruition of God's promise to bring us out of the wilderness by adhering to the growing self-serving belief in our culture of, "I've got what I need to get through these tough times, too bad for you if you don't." Israel didn't make it out of the wilderness as a bunch of individualists looking out for their own selfish needs. They made it out as a generous community who looked after one another.

What we learn from the scripture is that generosity is one of the fruits of our thankfulness of loving God.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul informs us that, "he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will reap bountifully."

Thanksgiving people know that God is generous and that we in gratitude for God's generosity are to be generous as well. Paul reminds us that if we sow with a sparing hand the harvest will be meager. But if we sow with a generous hand we will reap a generous harvest.

At a time when people are suffering and in need, generously sowing seed in things like investment in our infrastructure to create jobs, our teachers and educational system to train people for the future, adequate healthcare for all people, refinanced loans for those bound to untenable mortgages and extended unemployment benefits to those on the verge of losing them, is the seed that will reap a bountiful harvest in a good land. Add to that the sowing of the seeds of love and compassion for all God's children and we can almost taste the milk, honey, figs, olives, pomegranates and bread of the Promised Land!

Thankfulness: it is what we are made for. It leads to faith in times of temptation, to hope in times of despair, to character in times of crisis, to generosity in times of want, to love in times of fear.

It is the very heart of our relationship with God. Thankfulness is the portal to the Promised Land itself.

*Amen.*