

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

Thanks for Plenty Thanksgiving Day November 26, 2009

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Joel 2:21-27

Be not afraid, O land; be glad and rejoice. Surely the LORD has done great things. 22 Be not afraid, O wild animals, for the open pastures are becoming green. The trees are bearing their fruit; the fig tree and the vine yield their riches. 23 Be glad, O people of Zion, rejoice in the LORD your God, for he has given you the autumn rains in righteousness. He sends you abundant showers, both autumn and spring rains, as before. 24 The threshing floors will be filled with grain; the vats will overflow with new wine and oil. 25 'I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten-- the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm -- my great army that I sent among you. 26 You will have plenty to eat, until you are full, and you will praise the name of the LORD your God, who has worked wonders for you; never again will my people be shamed. 27 Then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the LORD your God, and that there is no other; never again will my people be shamed.

Happy Thanksgiving! I hope every one of you enjoys this wonderful day with your family and friends as we give thanks to the Lord for all his blessings. As we all know, the first Thanksgiving was December 4, 1619 at Berkeley Plantation on the north bank of the James River. The charter for Berkeley Hundred mandated that the day the ships carrying the settlers there arrived be kept as a Day of Thanksgiving. There are some who mistakenly believe the first Thanksgiving was celebrated by the Puritans at Plymouth Plantation in Massachusetts in 1621 in gratitude for their first successful growing season. But whichever of these was indeed the first, they both have this in common: both were

expressions of thanks to God for his preserving them from danger or from not having enough to eat.

Fast forward to today. No matter where we live, all of us here live in very safe and secure homes. All of us have plenty to eat. If you don't believe me, just wait until this afternoon. I think the plenty and the safety and security that we enjoy, as precious as they are, can have a very negative effect on our spiritual life. We can take them for granted to the point where we're not really thankful for them. As the old saying goes, "you don't miss your water 'til the well runs dry." It's a spiritual principle that it's hard to be profoundly thankful for things we take for granted.

Our reading from Joel is God's promise of blessing to people who had to learn the hard way not to take God's blessings for granted. Joel prophesied in Judah during the reign of Uzziah, which began in 792 B.C. Uzziah extended Judah's territory through daring military campaigns. He brought the kingdom unprecedented wealth and luxury. Their fields brought forth abundant harvests and everyone had plenty to eat. But in the midst of this the Lord sent his prophet Joel to warn God's people. Their hearts were turning away from him. They were becoming absorbed with their possessions and their own comfort.

In the opening chapters of his prophecy, Joel predicts the coming of a vast and massive plague of locusts that will cover the whole land. He describes them as an army, probably to show Uzziah that for all his military conquests, there is one army he will never defeat—the locusts sent by the Lord. The locusts devoured everything that grew. The crops were destroyed. The fields were stripped of their grass. The animals bellowed with hunger and died. Famine set in.

But what was even worse was that there was no way for God's people to maintain their relationship with the Lord through sacrifice. There were no animals to offer. There was no grain or oil to mix. What they were preoccupied with and took for granted—their food supplies and the wealth they brought—were gone. Along with them went what they really needed—their relationship with the God of Israel. Only then did they realize how desperate their situation really was.

Earlier in chapter 2, from which we read, is the core of God's message to his people through Joel: **“Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. 14 Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing-- grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God.” (Joel 2:13-14 NIV)**

God's people had come to rely on their kingdom's military might and its wonderful prosperity as constants, not variables. But what the Lord teaches them is that he is the only constant—all else is variable because all else depends on him. By reducing them to poverty and famine, he was driving them to return to him, the God of heaven and earth, the Almighty, who holds all of us in his hands. By forgetting him, though they possessed much, they had lost their reason for being, their very identity as the people of God.

But God's discipline of his people reveals his love for them, which we heard expressed in our first reading this morning in his wonderful promise: **“Be not afraid, O land; be glad and rejoice. Surely the LORD has done great things. 22 Be not afraid, O wild animals, for the open pastures are becoming green. The trees are bearing their fruit; the fig tree and the vine yield their riches. 23 Be glad, O people of Zion, rejoice in the LORD your God, for he has given you the autumn rains in righteousness. He sends you abundant showers, both autumn and spring rains, as before. 24 The threshing floors will be filled with grain; the vats will overflow with new wine and oil. 25 'I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten-- the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm -- my great army that I sent among you. 26 You will have plenty to eat, until you are full, and you will praise the name of the LORD your God, who has worked wonders for you; never again will my people be shamed. 27 Then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the LORD your God, and that there is no other; never again will my people be shamed.”**

Our God wants the best for us. The best is God himself. The best for us begins with loving and obeying him and putting him first. How do we do that in the midst of plenty? How do we give thanks for plenty? We can keep in mind Paul's words to Timothy about the church in Ephesus in 1 Timothy 6:17-19: **“Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. 18 Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. 19 In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.”**

The plenty we enjoy is from the Lord, but it is variable. The love and care of God for his people is our only constant. As we enjoy God's blessings today, let us keep in mind that it is God himself who is the best for us. He is the one unchanging constant in all the world's uncertainty. Let us put our faith and trust in him, even in the midst of our safety and prosperity.

Let us pray.