

“Fruit in a Basket”

Introduction: It has been said that there are really only two kinds of prayers: Help! and Thank You! The rest are only footnotes. My hunch is that most of us are pretty good at the first kind, and maybe not so good at the second. We’re good at crying for help, of recognizing that we, or our world, is in some sort of a mess and God please do something about it. If our cry for help is not answered, there doesn’t seem to be anything to give thanks for, and, if our cry for help is answered, we can skip off quickly to enjoy our change of fortune without pausing to give much thought to how it all happened. As if to emphasize this dynamic, Jesus once told of his experience of healing ten lepers. All ten of them had cried Help! but only one returned to say Thanks!

My own reminder of this reality comes from a wooden bowl that sits on our kitchen table. Generally, that bowl is filled with fruit, such as apples, bananas, oranges, and occasionally a pear or two. I really don’t give that bowl much thought, except when I have to move it to make room for guests, or when I notice that it’s getting empty, or when the bananas are getting too brown or the pears too soft. In other words, I only really take notice of it when it inconveniences me, or when I want more! Rarely do I pause when it is full to give thanks, or even when it’s empty, to give thanks that within an hour I can easily shoot off to the store and fill it right back up again.

This morning we’ll consider a basket of fruit that we find in a text that has to do with giving thanks. It might even be an account of the very first thanksgiving. In it, we hear our friends, the Israelites, cry Help! we hear how God answers, and then directs them to say Thank You! Thanksgiving, we learn, is a significant part of acknowledging and celebrating who God is, what he has done, and who he calls us to be.

I. A Wandering People

A. Moses begins: “When you have entered the land . . . and have taken possession of it and settled in it . . .” (v. 1). God’s instructions to the Israelites in this chapter assume that his people have both occupied, and begun to make a home in, the Promised Land. This represents a significant change of status because for centuries, this had been a wandering, homeless folk. As their worship liturgy declared, “My father was a wandering Aramean . . .” (v. 5). This refers to Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, who had wandered all over the ancient near east, running from his brother, picking up two wives from the territory of Aram, and eventually leading his family down to Egypt in a time of famine, in search of food. There, they found food alright, and even grew into a nation. However, they also become enslaved to the Egyptians.

B. All of this seemed in stark contrast to what God had promised this people through their ancestor Abraham. Yes, God had called Abraham to begin this wandering, to leave his homeland and go to the place God would show him. But he was to do this so that God could make his descendants into a great nation, bless them, and through them bring blessing to the world (Ge. 12:1-3). Well, they grew into a large nation alright, but being slaves in Egypt hardly seemed like a great thing. The people had no land and had become greatly oppressed. This sad state of affairs continued for several centuries.

II. A Remembered and Remembering People

A. Had God forgotten them? Had God forgotten his promise? This was the key, operative, and probably daily cry of this people. The prayer Help! was likely all they could muster.

Illustration: Help! is often all we can muster. Help! is a cry that has been uttered by many given events that have taken place in the world in recent weeks. Will God answer? Why does he so often seem silent? Advent, which begins next week, is a good time of the church year to reflect on this question. Advent reminds us that we actually live between two advents: the first was the

coming of Jesus to defeat sin and death, and the second will be his return in power and glory to restore all things. In the interim, we live in the overlap of the ages, in the kingdom of God that has already dawned but is not yet here in all of its fullness. In this time, evil still roams. All is not how it will be. In the midst of this, does God hear our cries? One thing we know for certain: we have a God who is faithful to his promises, even though his timing might not be our own.

We have one example of this faithfulness with the Israelites. God heard their cries for help, and acted on his promise to Abraham. He sent Moses, rescued his people, and led them, through a few more fits and starts, into the land of promise. There they would settle, build houses, and work the soil. God had remembered, both his people and his promise. Now, the question became, would they remember him, what he had done, and who he had called them to be?

B. It all hinged on their putting fruit in a basket—the first part of the harvest—and bringing it to a regular time of worship, which the instructions in this chapter were to launch. What was this fruit in a basket to represent? What was this offering to help them remember? Simply put, it was to help them remember God’s grace to them. As Moses instructed: “Take some of the firstfruits of all that you produce from the soil of the land the LORD your God is giving you and put them in a basket” (v. 2). Yes, the people had needed to go in and occupy the land. Yes, they had needed to plant seeds and work the soil. But the prior reality of all of this, the land itself as well as its fruitfulness, were gifts of God’s grace that needed to be remembered. God had kept his promise. God had proved faithful. And the best way to remember and respond to all of that was to worship by giving thanks. The tangible evidence of this grace of God was put in a basket, and brought as an offering, an act, of worship.

C. Notice that when they offered their fruit, they did so with an accompanying liturgy (vv. 3b-10a; for all you low church people!). This was to remind them of who they had been and what God had done for them. It was a reminder that God’s grace was not just to be found in the blessings of nature, but in the way God had acted in history on their behalf. And they also then shared what they had with the Levites and the aliens living among them, those who had no share of the land, as well as the fatherless and the widow, those who were unable to work the land. Worship wasn’t complete, in other words, until those in need had been cared for.

When you think about our own worship, all of this should have a familiar ring to it. We come together as a people to celebrate who God is and to remember and give thanks for what he has done. We offer God our thanks and praise for acting in his Son Jesus, on our behalf, rescuing us from the slavery of sin, and gifting us with his Spirit so that we can be ambassadors, as his body, of his love. We give thanks through song, through liturgy, through prayer, and by placing our first fruits in a basket, no longer actual pieces of fruit or produce but in currency that represents the fruit of our 21<sup>st</sup> century labor and which helps to provide for those in need. Then often we share a meal together. We do all of this to acknowledge our dependence on God for all that we have. Worship is really one large time of thanksgiving that helps us to order our way rightly.

The psalmist puts it this way: “The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me; to one who orders his way rightly I will show the salvation of God!” (Psalm 50:23, ESV). The act of thanksgiving, in other words, is instrumental in helping us to live well, to begin to see and experience the wholeness of life and joy that God brings.

Conclusion: What can help us be a remembering, thankful, people? In your home, maybe you can find something like my fruit bowl. I’ve been using it to remind me, and to give thanks for, the wonderful ways in which God continues to faithfully meet my needs. In the church, we offer you a pledge card. The scripture verse on them this year actually comes from this chapter: “And now, O LORD, I bring you the first fruits of the crop you have given me . . .” (v. 10). The card gives us an opportunity to be thoughtful and intentional about what we will put in the basket each week, not just what’s left over in our wallets or purses on a given Sunday, but the first fruits, the first

percentage, off the top, of all that God by his grace, has given us. As we place this gift in the basket each week, it helps us to order our way, to remind us, and give thanks for, all that God has done for us and wants to do through us for others.