

“Noticing What Has Gone Well”

based on Deuteronomy 8:7-18

As far as I can tell, gratitude is imperative to a holistic spiritual life. It might be the most important component. While this is something we know intuitively, recent research has emphasized its importance. Gratitude practices can change our perspectives, lighten our moods, and help us feel more at peace in the world. (This seems good, right? We might need this, especially now.)

One of you had a friend who had a wonderful practice: every day she took a moment to write down the thing she was most grateful for on a slip of paper and put it in a vase. On New Year's Eve she read them, one by one, and reflected on her year. I love the double blessing of this: both the practice of paying attention each day and the opportunities to review the good parts of a year.

At the core, I am aware of two very different motivations for faith. It seems to me that many people are motivated by fear, and that sort of religion has never been interesting to me. The other choice seems to be a motivation of gratitude: that because of being loved by God, and being grateful, we choose to love in return (because that's what God asks of us.)

Indeed, I think gratitude is at the very core of faith itself. Which is why I want to spend today looking at its ugly underbelly. Gratitude matters too much to be blind to how it can be misused.

The Deuteronomy text gives us a way to look at some of the underside of gratitude. This is a text suggested for the celebration of Thanksgiving Day in the United States, and it cuts off the chapter two verses from the end. When it is read as suggested, it makes some important points. Like the rest of the book of Deuteronomy, this text is concerned about the complacency that comes with wealth and well-being.

The idea is that the people learned to depend on God in the desert, when all they had to eat was manna, and even access to water limited and based on God's will. (This is their story, I might choose to tell it differently, but it is their story.) Once they got into the land with its abundances of gifts, they might forget that they are

just as dependent on God in the Promised Land as they were in the desert. From manna to wheat and barley, vines and fig trees and pomegranates, olive trees, and honey and an abundance of water! As Ronald Clements puts it in the New Interpreter's Bible, "It is precisely this richness and abundance that is seen as a temptation to forget God and the divine commandments."¹ Or, as Walter Brueggemann puts it in his commentary on Deuteronomy, "A gift kept long enough begins to seem like a possession."²

The text is deeply concerned that having access to wealth will lead the people to think they've earned the good lives they have, and that it will lead them away from God. Now, I think Deuteronomy is concerned about complacency because of the Exile. That is, the book was written down in the form it is now after the people had lost the land, their power, and many of their people. They were trying to figure out what they could have done differently to prevent that from happening, and when they looked backward, they were concerned that they'd become complacent. They thought they should have remembered the desert, and the dependence on God, and remained grateful.

However, the text doesn't really end where we left it. The final two verses in this section are, "If you do forget the Lord your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. Like the nations that the Lord is destroying before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the Lord your God." These lines raise much deeper concerns about gratitude for me. You see, the story of the Bible is that God gave the Promised Land to the ancient Israelites.

Furthermore, the Bible acknowledges that there were ALREADY PEOPLE living in the land when God decided to give it to "the people," and the Bible says that God lead the ancient Israelites to kill them off so the ancient Israelites could have the land instead. Believe it or not, there is both good news and bad news on this front.

The good news is that the killing off of all the people in the land didn't actually happen. We know this in at least two important ways: the first is that for the rest of the Bible's history we hear the challenges of living intermingled with the people of the land, the ones who didn't follow God. That indicates they weren't all killed off. Secondly, archeological research has looked at the cities that existed in

the land at that time, and they simply weren't concurred or destroyed. (So, no, Joshua did NOT fight the battle of Jericho, but that's a story for another day.) Addison Wright, a Catholic Biblical Scholar, thinks it was most likely that a very small band of nomadic people had an exceptionally profound experience of the divine in the desert – a God who cared about how people treated each other; when they got to a land they wanted to settle in they told their story; and the people in that place were moved by the story and choose to claim it as their own. Thus the origins of ancient Israel was a mixture of the native people of the land and those who entered it with the God-story.

That's the good news. Now for the bad news. The history of North and South America was formed by the Bible's meta-narrative about God's Promised Land and the right of those with might to take it from those who already lived on it. The Bible speaks of God giving the land to God's people, including God giving the people military victory. It sounds horribly like Manifest Destiny, doesn't it? While the mass killing of ancient Palestine didn't happen, the mass killing in the Americas most certainly did, and it was justified with these Biblical stories.

(The Bible is a very scary weapon.)

This week, as our nation celebrates Thanksgiving, we remember with gratitude the Native people's generosity in sharing their food to keep the early European settlers alive. Our country's narrative usually ends there (or at least that's how I learned it as a child), and ignores that the European settlers responded to this generosity with mass murder, justified by the Bible. According to A People's History of the United States, “The Puritans also appealed to the Bible, Psalm 2:8, 'Ask of me and I shall give thee, the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession.' And to justify their use of force to take the land, they cited Romans 13:2, 'Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.’”³

Personally, I am grateful for the Native Americans who fed those settlers, and helped them make it through the winter. At the same time, gratitude alone seems insufficient when looking at the larger story. Telling the story as I was taught it as a child glosses over a much larger story of genocide, one justified with our faith

tradition, one whose impacts are still very much alive in the Native American people and their descendants today.

As a descendant of those Pilgrims, how can I claim gratitude for the actions of the Native people without letting that gratitude turn into complacency for the profound harm that was also a part of the story? As a faith descendant of those ancient Israelites, how do I make sense of their stories of violence in the name of God, and the justification of violence that has come from those stories? And how do I hold that in tension with my gratitude for the text itself and the stories of faith? As a person of relative wealth in the world, how do I do more than justify complacency with gratitude?

There are even DEEPER questions under all of this. As people of faith, we often talk about the good gifts God has given us: people who love us, abilities we have, food, shelter, etc. Yet, when we attribute those good gifts to God, how do we make sense of people who are lonely, those with disabilities, people who doesn't have food or shelter? Does our gratitude for what we do have blind us to the fact that God loves people without just as much as God loves us? How can we be grateful without being blind to the struggles of others of God's children? How do we make sense of the different struggles people face? And how much do we attribute to God?

Do we want to claim that God gives all good gifts and that bad things in life are our own fault? Or the fault of society? Or of evil? Do we want to claim that God “has a plan” and that plan includes some people having and some not? Does all good come from God? And if so, why didn't God attribute it more fairly? And where does the bad come from?

Furthermore, when does gratitude for one thing become a chain that binds people? For example, a person who is grateful to have enough income in their family is thus stuck in an abusive relationship by that very income?

All of this is to say that gratitude that is, I still think, the very core of our faith, can have a very complicated and noxious underbelly. While I worry about gratitude being a source of complacency, I also think that at its best gratitude can move us out of complacency. When we pay attention to what is GOOD in the world, we make space for more good. Sure, the good is often complicated, and needs further investigation. That needs to happen too. Nothing is pure, and we

have to live in the complicated, even with gratitude. So, despite all the complications, may we pay attention and respond with gratitude to what has gone well! Amen

1Ronald Clements, Deuteronomy in the New Interpreter's Bible Vol 2, (Nashville: Abingdon,1998) p. 356

2Walter Brueggemann, Deuteronomy (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), p. 109.

3Howard Zinn, A People's History of the United States (New York: First Perennial Classics, 2001), p. 14

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