

## **The Yield of Grateful Hearts**

Rev. John Allen

One of the occupational hazards of being a pastor is that you tend to be the go to person to say grace before a meal. Not that I mind. It is just always kind of funny to me that as soon as soon as the food is in front of us, people kind of shift in their seats, and glance at me...

It happens so much, that I have developed a sort of go-to blessing.

And a big part of it is expressing gratitude. Gratitude to God, who is the source of all good things. But I always like to make sure that the dirt gets its due, and that we remember that all the food we enjoy begins in the soil of God's earth.

So I typically say something like "We thank you God for this meal, born from your good earth, and prepared with loving hands. May it nourish our bodies as this time together will nourish our souls."

When I opened this week's scripture reading from Joel, it took me by surprise. However many times I have read through this text, the first line never hit me quite as clearly as it did this time.

It begins with the prophet talking to the ground! Talking to the very soil!

Do not fear, O soil;  
be glad and rejoice,  
for the Lord has done great things!

Its not the only place scripture gives the ground a spiritual life.

When Jesus' detractors tried to silence the adoring crowds, he told them, if they are quiet the rocks will cry out praises.

But it is striking. How can soil be happy? How can dirt rejoice?

Several years ago I was spending the summer in Arizona during an historic drought. It was my first time to the region, but I was there with a friend who was, from the moment we arrived, quite sad at the state of the land.

The once brilliant red rocks were ashen and pale. The smell of sage she had grown to love was absent as the plants lie dried up in the cracked soil hoarding their last drops of moisture deep within.

I was perfectly happy, it was all new to me. But she was not. She kept talking about how it had been before the drought.

Then one day it rained.

Not much. Not for long. Just a few minutes of desert downpour.

But she sprinted out into the midst of it, rejoicing.

And do you know what, the earth rejoiced with her.

The dust was rinsed of those red rocks and they glistened.

The air, almost instantly was filled with the sweetest scent. And you could see plants, straightening, almost craning their necks toward the rain.

The cracks in the ground healed. And the earth sprang to life. The smells, and sounds, of life, abundant. All around.

That's what I imagine when I imagine grateful soil rejoicing in God. It may sound strange, but if any of you have ever been in an arid place right after the rain, the earth seems to sing.

All this time, I had been so grateful to the gifts that God brought to us through the soil of God's good Earth. It didn't even occur to me to think that the soil itself is grateful to God.

Imagine that. All of creation. Alive. Crackling with gratitude. Praising God. Not just people, but animals, plants, even the very ground.

What are you grateful for?

Perhaps it is the shelter you live in. Or the food you eat. A warm and comfortable bed.

What has been poured out on you freely, and unbidden, like the rain falls upon the waiting soil?

The breath in your lungs, the beating of your heart, the presence of a world in which to dwell, the love of others.

The love of God.

Take a moment. Think of one thing that you feel grateful for.

[wait]

Do you have it?

The practice of gratitude is really in vogue right now. You can listen to the radio, turn on tv, or read popular self-help books, and hear all around people touting the power of gratitude.

And it is true, the practice of gratitude has a profound positive impact on our lives. Studies have shown that people who think everyday about what they are grateful for are happier and healthier.

So think of that one thing. That thing that you feel grateful for.

I'd encourage you to do this everyday. Maybe before bed. Or during a commute. Take time to hold in your heart something that you are grateful for. Give God thanks for it.

I have been doing this for a while, and it is such a powerful and meaningful experience.

But I have to tell you, there is also a nagging worry that comes along with it.

I have so much to feel grateful for.

But when I feel grateful for food, I experience this nagging reminder that others are hungry.

When I feel grateful for loving relationships, I remember that others are lonely

When I feel grateful for my life, I remember that others lives are under threat.

When I feel grateful for my home, I remember that others make their homes under bridges and beside roadways.

How can I feel grateful for the gifts I have received, while others go without those simple gifts? How can I welcome a plentiful harvest while others cupboards are bare?

A well-known feminist theologian named Beverly Harrison had a much simpler table grace than the one I use. At her dinner table, she would simply pray: “some have food, some have none, God bless the revolution.”

I suspect that many of you have had this same nagging thought sitting at an abundant thanksgiving feast, giving God thanks for it.

“If God gave this to me. Is it God who kept it from others?”

When you come to this question, you have reached the limit of the popular idea of gratitude. Because the self-help books and tv talk shows tend to talk about gratitude mostly in terms of what it can do for us. How it make us feel better. Make our lives more enjoyable.



That nagging feeling, telling you that something doesn't feel just right, is correct. Something is not right.

But the scarcity of the world is not a failure of God's generosity. It is a failure of human generosity. God pours out into this world more than enough love, shelter, and food for us each to have what we need.

It is up to us on the ground make sure it gets where it is needed.

In our Christian tradition there is world beyond the personal benefits of gratitude.

Generosity.

When we feel grateful, we ought to become generous.

Generosity is the fruit of a grateful heart.

When the rain falls upon the earth, abundantly and unbidden, the earth opens, blooms, yields fruit, fills tables and storehouses.

What if everyone lived that way?

What if every person saw the gifts that filled their lives and thought first how how to share them?

Think of that thing from before. That thing you are grateful for. How could you share that gift?

How can you be generous with what you have been blessed with?  
How can you be generous with your home? Or your time? Or your resources? Or your love?

Let generosity sprout from your gratitude.

This morning we fill the front of this sanctuary with signs of our gratitude and generosity. The bags of food which will go to fill the pantries of the hungry.

The pledge cards we will collect, money which will —in the hands of this church— become music, and sermons, and care. It will become hope for the brokenhearted. Love for the lonely. We will share these gifts with community organizations committed to easing human suffering, and building a more just and hopeful world.

We do not make these gifts out of guilt or obligation.

We make them out of gratitude.

We are grateful for what we have received, and in response we open ourselves with abundant and generous hope.

And in doing so, we keep God's gifts moving. We take what has been entrusted to us and dedicate it to God's hope for this community and the world.

In my family growing up, we would always go around the table on thanksgiving and respond to the question: "What are you thankful for?"

I like that tradition, but this year, let's add one more question, and ask everyone: "What can you share?"

