

“Don’t Forget!”
Deuteronomy 8:1-18

November 24,2011

Thanksgiving Day

“Don’t forget....!” Have you ever had someone remind you to do something by uttering those words? Don’t forget to take your umbrella! Don’t forget to wear a coat! Don’t forget to pick up the dry cleaning! Don’t forget to say thanks! (That’s one we use with our children when they receive gifts on their birthdays or at Christmas.) What starts out as a gentle reminder often ends up sounding like a nag.

Why do we have to be told “don’t forget!”? The answer is obvious. Without the reminders, we would probably forget to do those things. In many of those situations, the reason might be simple absent mindedness. But, in the area of giving thanks, especially when it comes to God, the reason for forgetting might be different.

We might forget to give thanks to God because we feel we really don’t have much for which to give thanks. In our text for this day, the people of Israel are reminded that they didn’t have a whole lot while wandering in the desert for forty years. Sometimes they went hungry. Sometimes they had only the bare minimum to eat – the manna which God gave them. It’s easy to forget to give thanks when you don’t have what you need or as much as you need.

That’s a key issue for God’s 21st century people. When we combine what we want to have with what our culture says we are entitled to have, it’s very easy to forget about giving thanks. Sometimes, especially in bad economic times, we don’t have all that we need. We have to do without. Sometimes, we simply don’t have all that we would like to have. Even when having three meals a day, clothes on our back, and a roof over our heads, we think we are suffering when we don’t have the most up to date cell phone or when the high speed internet goes down. We like to tell ourselves that we would be more thankful if only we had more stuff to give thanks for.

But having more stuff is part of the problem in giving thanks, not the solution. When we have more stuff, we are just as likely to forget to give thanks to God. God made a promise to ancient Israel

to bless them physically. He said to them, “the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing out in the valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper.” (Deut. 8:7-9) All sounds pretty good, doesn't it? In fact, the Lord says that they would eat and be full and bless the Lord their God for it.

But then comes the problem. The Lord warns them against forgetting Him. When they have everything their hearts desire – bellies full, nice houses, and much wealth, then the Lord says, “your heart [will] be lifted up, and you [will] forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” (Deut. 8:14). In other words, in their haste to enjoy God's blessings, they will forget God's salvation in freeing them from slavery, defeating Pharaoh and his mighty forces at the Red Sea, and bringing them to the Promised Land.

We do the same thing with an even greater salvation. In our haste to acquire and enjoy more and more necessities of life, creature comforts, new technology and the like, we forget what's really important in the first place. God has blessed us so richly in so many ways. Compared with the poverty that exists in the rest of the world, every person here lives like royalty. But we forget something even greater and more important: God's salvation for us through Christ Jesus. God freed us from slavery to sin which is our natural inheritance and death which is its natural consequence. God defeated Satan and His evil forces. He is bringing us to the Promise Land of heaven and eternal life there.

When we forget God's greater action in salvation, there is the danger of forgetting His lesser action in providing for our physical needs. When the people of Israel enjoyed all of their physical possessions which came as blessings from the Lord, the Lord warns them, “Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.’” (Deut. 8:17)

Is that not our problem as well? While we blame God for what we do not have, we take credit for what we do have. We think that all we have is a result of our hard work and effort. It is no wonder

that we are often selfish with it, fail to use our resources to His glory, and need to be reminded to give thanks to God. We think it to be ours because we earned it.

What's the solution to our forgetting? It's not having more stuff or being nagged into remembering to give thanks. It is having the correct starting point in our remembering. As richly as we have all been physically blessed – symbolized in the lovely display here in our church and the sumptuous feast to follow – that is the wrong place to start in remembering to give thanks to our God.

Instead of starting there – where God has supported our lives and made them happy – let us start where God has redeemed our lives from death and hell and where He has won for us eternal joy. Instead of looking at our physical blessings and remembering to give thanks, look to the cross and remember our spiritual blessings – forgiveness for all our sins delivered in Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, and Holy Communion; the continual love and support of God in His Word and the fellowship of His Church; and the assurance – no matter how badly this world and the effects of sin beat us down – of life past death, the resurrection of our bodies from the grave, and eternal life with God and all friends and family who have died in the faith in heaven.

When remembering physical blessings, remember that all we have is pure gift from our loving Heavenly Father. We deserve absolutely nothing. Yet God, in His mercy, has given us so much. Instead of thinking of what we don't have, we remember how much we do have – not only the bare minimum to eke a living, but so many unnecessary blessings given by God purely for our enjoyment.

As we remember our redemption in Christ Jesus and all of our physical possessions as pure gift, we will find that the amount of physical blessings will not matter. In Christ, we have all that we need to face eternity. We are certainly able to face any situation now. In fact, misfortune or a lack of physical blessings may be for our benefit. The Lord said that He allowed the people of Israel to suffering during their forty years in the desert to test them and see what was in their heart. In having them suffer or go without, the Lord wanted them to “know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” (Deut. 8:3)

The same is true for us. Any lack of blessings will help us remember that our life does not consist of our possessions. We do not live by bread or any other physical blessing. We live by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. We win either way.

That is what St. Paul is trying to tell us in the epistle reading for today. He says, "I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content." Wouldn't we love to know that secret? It's not really a secret. Paul goes on to say, "I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me." (Philippians 6:12)

When we remember this – that we can do all things through the strength that the Lord gives us – we will be thankful and content in every circumstance – when we have plenty and when we hunger; we have an abundance of material things and when we are in need. Then we won't have to be told, "Don't forget to give thanks!" We will always remember. Amen.