

GRATIA
Sermon for Thanksgiving B-Joel 2:21-27
LPC, 11/22/12

If your only source about the subject of rainfall were popular music, you would have the impression that rainfall is bad. Everything from “Rain, rain, go away,” to “Wait till the sun shines, Nellie,” to “Don’t rain on my parade,” bespeaks the inconvenient and depressing aspect of rain. Even a happy song like “Singing in the rain” is ironic: the singer is so happy that even the lugubrious effect of rain does not daunt him.

This side of our culture as much as anything else points up how far we have come from an agrarian economy, where rain, so long as it is not catastrophic, like Superstorm Sandy was last month, is almost universally welcome, and even prayed for, and seen as a sign of divine favor.

Nowadays, in this time and in this place, we rarely give thanks for rain. Perhaps our lack of appreciation for rain is related to the fact that rain for us is not scarce. When you consistently have a sufficiency of something, that thing slips from consciousness as something to be grateful for.

It’s when something is scarce that we pray about it. If any of you tuned in to PBS this past week to see the series about the American Dust Bowl of the 1930’s, you know that the scarcity of rain is far worse than having your play, or your picnic, or your parade cancelled due to rain.

In the Bible, except perhaps in the story of Noah’s flood, rain always appears as a blessing. This is hardly surprising given the relatively dry environment of the Middle East, where the Bible was mostly written. In the Bible, rain is a blessing during the time of Elijah the prophet, and it is a blessing in some of the Bible’s most haunting poetry.

One figure of speech that recurs is mention of “the early and the late rains.” This phrase appears in this morning’s excerpt from the prophet Joel: “O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before.”

This language recurs in the New Testament. The Letter of James contains the words, “Be patient therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and late rains.” Johannes Brahms chose these words (among many others) for his famous *Requiem*. It was in rehearsing for a performance of this piece that I recognized that Brahms, and James, meant these words symbolically. The early rains are the blessings of this life. The latter rains are the blessings of the life to come, in God’s perfected creation.

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What happens to us, that being grateful for the early rains, the blessings of this life, slips from our consciousness? Is it because when we have a sufficiency of anything, we come to expect it as our due?

Now most of us will express thanks to God when we perceive an abundance of something -- like love of family, or health after illness – but we may overlook gratitude in cases of sufficiency. We pray to God when we have too little or too much of something, but do we remember to give thanks when we simply have enough?

The appropriate response to sufficiency is surely gratitude. This Thanksgiving Day, may I encourage gratitude for sufficiency. May we be grateful for the things we have neither too little or too much of. May we be grateful for “enough.” Enough is not something we can just expect. Enough is not something we are due. Enough is itself a gift from God. People who regard “enough” as their due set themselves up for continual disappointment. Whereas people who give thanks for “enough” are happy. What’s more, grateful people are never defeated.

One of my college friends was the son of a Black Baptist preacher, growing up in Georgia in the 1960’s. His father was active in the Civil Rights movement, which made him highly unpopular with some of his neighbors. One November, the family house was fire-bombed. The house was not destroyed, but significantly damaged. Nevertheless, the family proceeded with their plans to celebrate Thanksgiving.

Saying grace before dinner, the father waxed eloquent, going on at length, thanking God for abundant blessings. My friend said he felt like saying, “Dad! The living room is gone! How can you give thanks?” Relating the story, my friend, who had a wonderful delivery, had his audience in stitches. The son’s reaction was certainly understandable, but it was the father’s undefeated spirit that stays with me and inspires me to this day.

The funny thing is, that gratitude for sufficiency is a fertile and expansive thing. The more you pray the prayer of thanks, the more sufficiency you realize you have. In fact, the more you pray the prayer of thanks, the more abundance you realize you have. It is a happy and graced way to live.

There’s that word “grace,” used in the sense of God’s abundant, undeserved, loving providence. But of course, in English, there’s another sense of the word “grace.” As we sit down to our Thanksgiving meals today, many of us will be saying, “grace,” in the sense of a prayer of thanks for food. Grace in this sense must derive from a time when prayers before food were said in Latin, the Latin word for thanks being “Gratia.” How happy the linguistic relationship is between humans giving thanks, and God granting grace. The two things are practically synonymous.

Grace is giving thanks, and giving thanks is grace. Thankful people are happy people. Thankful people are never defeated. Before food, before anything, may our prayer be, “For what we are about to receive, may the Lord may us truly thankful.”