

## **There Are No Self-Made People      Deuteronomy 8:7-18**

The Book of Deuteronomy is the 5th Book of the 5 Books of Moses. It's name literally means a second telling of the law and scholars think it is developed hundreds and hundreds of years after, during the reign of King Josiah when after a time of peace and prosperity, a Book of the Covenant is found in the Temple, and a revival of faith in God took place. Today's reading from the Book of Deuteronomy seems so apt for us to consider in this culture, because it feels as though we live in a similar situation as the People of God during King Josiah's reign. As Americans we have lived in peace and prosperity for some time. And we have a strong mythic connection to self-reliance. This has some roots in our ancestors who were at times a wandering people. Some of us trace our ancestry to the Pilgrims on Plymouth Rock, escaping religious persecution. Others to a lone cowboy or cowgirl or pioneers who, like the people of Israel, also crossed the dessert to get to the promised land. Some are newer to this country with ancestors who came over the ocean with nothing but the shirt on their back. And some have much longer and deeper roots to the Native peoples who inhabited this land long before aliens from foreign shores landed here in ships. These are all amazing and strong souls who made a life and living, but not one of them did it completely alone. There are no completely self-reliant people in the world.

This idea of total self-reliance is strong, and some of you may be thinking, what about all those people you just mentioned. Hmm, well, the Pilgrims after relying totally on sailors and a ship to get them here, then relied on the Native Peoples to teach them how to survive in this new environment. The pioneers who braved the dessert crossing of the Oregon Trail had to buy wagons built by someone else, and oxen raised by someone else and supplies. Even the lone cowgirl or cowboy probably didn't make their own clothes or boots, or if they did, someone taught them how to do it, as well as how to ride a horse, and somehow get a horse.

As our scripture suggests, it is human nature to think we have done things on our own.

Especially after all the hard work and the struggle is behind us. As the Message version of today's scripture states, ***Make sure you don't become so full of yourself and your things that you forget God.... If you start think to yourselves, "I did all this. And all by myself. I'm rich. It's all mine!" Well, think again. Remember that God... gave you the strength to produce this wealth.***

And it is not just God who has given us strength to succeed, but many other people too. How many of you were unable to feed or clothe yourself when you were first born? Anybody. All of us, of course! Someone, and probably more accurately, many people took care of us. And once we managed those skills a whole new group of people began to teach us how to read and do math and and and.... But somehow when we reach young adulthood, we think we have created ourselves, ex nihilo, out of nothing. Being the parent of a young adult I understand that my son is proud of all he is doing now. And he should be, he has carved out a nice life in a new place with his own skills and abilities. But I know that God has given him great gifts and abilities that his Mother and I helped him develop. And I also know when the bill for the cell phone comes and the Medical Insurance, that he is still dependent on us. Someday he will understand the interdependence that is the heart of all families and cultures. But some people do not. They hold onto that untrue myth of self-reliance. I know this profoundly from many of the Hospice patients with whom I worked. The heart-breaking statement I heard most often was "What's the point of going on, I'm no use to anybody." These people who still had gifts to give of wisdom and courage and love, thought they had no value because someone had to help them with personal care or help them eat. This rejection of vulnerability is one of the worst components of the myth of self-reliance. We are all vulnerable and need help at times. And it is from that acknowledgement that we can develop the character trait needed for thanksgiving: gratitude. If we think we are self-reliant, for what or whom would we need to be grateful?

Gratitude is good for us. Far from being a cliché or a sentiment left over from a quaint

yesteryear, gratitude has become the stuff of modern science. The University of California, recently conducted a multimillion dollar study on the science of gratitude, looking at changes in brain chemistry and other measureable things that occur in people who intentionally incorporate specific gratitude practices into their lives. If you are interested, the particulars are available on a website called "The Science of Gratitude." And the University of California is not alone. Indeed, there is National Institute for Health funded research on the power of gratitude to improve well being for individuals as well as for organizational climates. Starting with a climate of gratitude, changes things and leads to greater success in organizations.

And gratitude is not just good for organizations. It is also good for our individual souls. For one thing, it increases humility. It reminds us that we did not come to where we are in life entirely on our own. Most of us have had advantages and help along the way, even if just the advantage of good genes or a quick mind or a resilient personality or good education. But again, the American temptation, like that of the ancient Israelis is to fall into thinking we've achieved it all on our own. Barry Switzer, a football coach, said, "Some people are born on third base and go through life thinking they hit a triple." We who were born on third base need to remember to be grateful for the advantages that have made it so much easier for us to get to home plate, and be careful not to judge those who were born in the batter's box, or perhaps not even on the diamond at all.

Gratitude is closely related to humility. And the combination of the two makes us far more bearable as people, both to others and I think, to ourselves. Researcher Dr. Melanie Greenberg writes, "Experiencing and expressing gratitude is an important part of any spiritual practice. It opens the heart and activates positive emotion centers in the brain. Regular practice of gratitude can change the way our brain neurons fire into more positive automatic patterns. The positive emotions it evokes can soothe distress and broaden our thinking patterns so we develop a larger and more expansive view of our lives. Gratitude is an emotion of connectedness, which reminds us we are part of a larger universe with all living things."

And so I am suggesting today that we cultivate a general, spiritual posture of living from gratitude.

This is not about adding the perfunctory "thank you" to something done on your behalf. It's about learning to notice and to linger over the good stuff in life...the simple blessings and delights along the way, and the good we see in one another. We need to cultivate this as we do other disciplines and habits, by decision and effort, by training ourselves to look for specific things for which to be grateful, and then by stopping in order to savor them. Its not that we should ignore the pain and suffering when they come. Indeed, they need to be named and faced. But in the long run, we can counter-balance the pain, by learning to linger over the joy, by learning not to take it for granted, by learning to oil the machinery of life with the glad balm of gratitude.

One of the simplest spiritual disciplines to practice is to take time at the beginning or end of each day to look for five things for which one can be thankful. And be as specific as possible. So instead of naming "my family", you can find one particular moment or interaction with a family member. Instead of saying "my home", you could say "the way the breeze blows through our windows and cools and refreshes." It may sound simplistic, even trite. But such mindfulness of our simple blessings can fill us with a fresh, new awareness of humility and joy and even awe at the generosity of life. It is amazing the power this simple practice has to change the way we perceive, and therefore experience, our lives.

So go forth into Thanksgiving week, not focused on your to-do list or all that needs to be done, but rather all the people that have brought you to this moment in your life: those who nurtured you and helped you or pack your groceries or teach your children or even give you a ticket so you remember not to drive so fast so you and others will remain safe. Let us go forth boldly declaring, "I need you... I need other people to live, to accomplish my life. And I am glad that my work or my wisdom or my encouragement or even my need to be taken care of provides for other people the things they need to accomplish their life. And let us thank the one who gave to all these abilities and these talents and life itself. To God the Master Creator, who makes us in her own image to be creators of our lives together. AMEN