

2 Corinthians 9:6-15 – November 23, 2022 (Thanksgiving Eve)

We all remember the stories about the original Thanksgiving at Plymouth Rock. We grew up with picture book images of pilgrims in bonnets and stovepipe hats. Native Americans in skins and feathers. A huge wild turkey sitting in the middle of a table surrounded by squash and pumpkins and other vegetables. Historians tell us that depiction is probably more fiction than fact, but it continues to linger in the minds of both children and adults.

Whatever the scene actually looked like, one thing is certain. The Thanksgiving at Plymouth Rock and the Thanksgiving in our homes tomorrow will definitely have one thing in common: food.

Food was a major part of that Plymouth Thanksgiving, and it's definitely a part of our modern American Thanksgiving. But there is a significant difference. Our Thanksgiving is centered more in wondering just what we should serve, which recipes we should follow, where we will put all the heaping dishes, and – above all – just how much of this food can we consume without becoming permanently comatose.

Whereas their Thanksgiving was primarily a harvest festival. Their Thanksgiving existed because there would be enough food to keep them from starving. The harvest had come, and there was food for all. For that they gave thanks.

The readings I chose for this evening are not those assigned for Thanksgiving Day. This year, as I have occasionally in the past, the readings are those assigned for a Harvest Festival. Because, fundamentally, that's what Thanksgiving is. They work equally well.

And I particularly like the inclusion of this passage from 2 Corinthians. Because it's a passage that teaches about thanksgiving using the metaphor of a harvest. Farming metaphors are all over scripture of course. The parable of the sower. The parable of the wheat and tares. Paul's metaphor for the complementary work that he and Apollos did in Corinth.

They're all over the place. Which makes it important to sort out exactly what is being symbolized in each one. Because they're often talking about very different things.

In this passage, we have two sowers, one who sows sparingly and one who sows bountifully. Why would a person sow sparingly? Well, this is something that even modern day farmers may not think about right away. Because farming today has really separated the act of sowing from the act of harvesting.

Farmers today buy their seed from a supplier, sow it, grow it, harvest it, sell it, and then buy more seed for the next crop. But that's not how it worked in the ancient world, or for pretty much all of human history until less than 100 years ago or so. Before companies like Monsanto had copyright protections on their seeds, farmers would have to save a portion of one season's harvest in order to have seeds to plant the next season's crop.

Sowing sparingly wasn't about saving a buck on seeds. It was about making sure you had enough to eat before the next harvest came in. And sowing bountifully meant taking a risk. Sacrificing your present security for a future reward.

So when Paul makes this statement, he's not saying something profound. He's giving them what is probably a piece of well-known, proverbial wisdom. Those who sow sparingly know that they will reap sparingly. They're playing it safe. Those who sow bountifully know that they will reap bountifully. High risk, high reward. In a sense, they're living dangerously.

At least, they're living dangerously in worldly terms. Because this passage is not about sowing literal grain. This is a metaphor. A Pauline parable. And the sowing that Paul is describing is acts of generosity.

God supplies you seed. God provides you physical and spiritual blessings. As Luther puts it in the Small Catechism: "God has made me and all creatures... He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil."

All these blessings are the seeds God gives to us. And Paul is saying that we have two choices. We can hold onto those seeds and sow sparingly. Play it safe. God gave us these blessings. He's not going to compel us to give them away. It's completely our choice what we do with them. After all, God loves a cheerful giver.

But, if we so choose, we can also be generous with these seeds and sow bountifully. And it will feel risky to do so. Our sinful human nature will say that we're doing something terribly dangerous. We're giving away too much. We need to hold more back for ourselves.

Forgetting, of course, that God is able to make all grace abound to you. He is able to give you all sufficiency in all things at all times. So that you can abound, not in possessions, but in good works.

That's God's goal. Does he care if you have the nicest house, the nicest car, the nicest clothes? No. Does he care that you have enough to do the good works he has given you to do? Absolutely. He will provide, maybe not all that you want, but certainly all that you need to accomplish his purposes for you.

But what's the point of all this? Paul says that we're sowing seeds for a harvest. The seeds are the blessings that God has given to us. But what is the harvest? What are we reaping sparingly or reaping bountifully?

Well, on the most basic level, he says we're supplying the needs of the saints. And when Paul said "saints," he wasn't using the term in a general sense. He meant they were literally supplying the needs of St Peter and St John and the other disciples living in Judea.

Palestine was undergoing a major famine. Food prices had skyrocketed. And this whole section asking the Corinthians to be generous relates to an offering that Paul is collecting to help the Christian church in Jerusalem. So one of the harvests that they reap is simply helping people. Helping people who are starving. Helping people who are impoverished. And that's a good enough reason all on its own.

But Paul expands on this. He says that there's more here than just supplying physical needs, as important as those are. He writes, *"You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God."* That is their harvest. Thanksgiving.

When you sow the seed of God's blessing upon others you reap a harvest of their thanksgiving. Their thanksgiving to you. And more importantly, their thanksgiving to God. *"They will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others."*

Think about that. When you are generous, you give someone reason to glorify God. When you are generous, you give them reason to be thankful.

Now, I don't know about you, but right about now I could really use a world where more people glorified God. I could really use a world where more people were thankful for what God had given them. We look around and we see this godless world where everybody is selfish and materialistic and we throw up our hands, saying, "Oh, what a terrible unchristian world we live in. What do we do about it?"

And Paul replies, "Here's what you do: Help them. Be generous to them. Love them. Give them a reason to glorify God and give him thanks. And they will."

It's not such a crazy concept. Because it's exactly why we glorify God and give him thanks. Not just for his physical blessings, but his spiritual blessings. We glorify God and give him thanks because he was generous to us. Generous enough to go to the cross for our redemption. Generous enough to lay down his own life.

We sow seeds of physical blessings in generosity to those around us, but Christ sowed the seed of his own life into our dead hearts, that we might have new life in him. In this, we have seen and experienced the surpassing grace of God upon us. And so now we say with Paul and the Corinthians and all the saints, past, present, and future: Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!

Thanksgiving is a harvest festival. We are each the harvest of God's great generosity. And every day we have an opportunity to sow the seed of generosity into this dark, sinful world. That we may reap a harvest of thanksgiving to the Lord. And bring the light of life into their hearts as well. Amen.