

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Mighty Acts of God: Saying Thanks”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Exodus 13:1-10
Matthew 22:15-22

My wife Cindy is a proud graduate of the Doris Seiler School for Fine Finished Young Ladies. If you have never heard of this exclusive academy, that is ok because only those who were daughters, granddaughters and great granddaughters of Doris Seiler were ever admitted. As a granddaughter of Doris Seiler, Cindy was taught such things as, “You can always tell a lady by her hands.” She was also taught the mortal obligation of thank-you notes. What I mean by that is that perhaps one’s soul was at risk if you did not write notes. I had watched Cindy perfect this art prior to our marriage. At her wedding showers, she would be sure that meticulous notes were kept as to who gave what so she could write a personal thank you to each giver. But I did not discover how far this extended until our honeymoon. The day after our wedding before we headed out we stopped by Cindy’s mom’s house to finish opening wedding gifts and completing the list. That night when we stopped for the evening and it was time for bed. I snuggled in with my new bride. She smiled at me. Then she handed me five thank you notes to write with these words. “You write to your friends and family. I will write to mine and if we do five thank you notes a night we will be finished before our honeymoon is over.” Sexier words had never been spoken.

I want to stop here for a moment and take a poll. How many of you have ever written a thank-you note? A thank-you email? A thank-you text or tweet? Or, simply said thank you to someone who has done something for you? Great, then we all have this sense that even though there are different ways of saying thank you, we all know that we are supposed to do so, even though we were not graduates of the Doris Seiler School for Fine Finished Young Ladies. And in fact, I would guess there are times when gratitude simply flows out of us because we are so thankful. I would guess in some way the Israelites felt the same way. They had become slaves, had cried out to God, God heard them and then had set them free. God had even destroyed the Egyptian army in the process. Not a bad job. Their problem then was, how to say thank you? Fortunately, they did not have to think too hard about this because God told them. They would become graduates of the I Am who I Am, school for fine, finished God followers. And here is how they were to say thank you.

First, they were to give; to give their best. God tells them that they were to consecrate the first to open the womb among the Hebrews, of human beings and animals, as belonging to God. For many cultures around the Hebrews to dedicate something meant to literally sacrifice it in order to “feed the gods.” This was not the intent of dedication in the Israelite culture. Though the Hebrews would develop a sacrificial system, it was not because God was hungry, but by offering their best, they would orient themselves appropriately to God. As Jesus would later say, our hearts are where our treasures are. Thus, when the people gave their best to God, their hearts were turned toward God. And by being turned toward God their lives would be blest by all that God was offering to them and to the world. This part of the thank you was as much for the people as it was for God.

Second, they were to remember. They were to remember by acting out the story of deliverance. “Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt...seven days you shall eat unleavened bread and on the seventh there will be a festival to the Lord.” In other words, this saying thank-you to God was not to be a one-time event. It was instead to be a continuing remembrance of what God had done. On the surface, this may appear to be God saying, “I’m not ever satisfied with one thank you and I need you to keep on stroking my ego.” But it is not. This act of thanksgiving was intended to remind the people of the kind of God that they worshipped. The kind of God they followed. This God was a loving, liberating God who would be present when they were in need. This was the God who would continue to set them free from the forces that bound them. This was a God they could count on. This part of the thank you was for the people as much as it was for God.

Finally, they were to tell. They were to tell this story to their children. “You shall tell your child on that day, ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.’” One of the problems with human beings is that we forget. We forget what others have done for us. We forget that there have been those who helped us. And so when we find ourselves in difficult circumstances we wonder if there is anyone to help us; anyone to whom we can turn? And the Hebrews had been no different. When they were in Egypt they had slowly forgotten the God who had saved them in the past; the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. By telling the story to their children they would insure that people would remember God’s saving love from generation to generation. This is why, at the Passover Seder, it is the children who ask the four great questions, beginning with “Why is this night different from all other nights?” By passing down their story, the Hebrews would remember the one to whom they could turn.

We are only here this morning because for the last 2,500 years men and women have been giving thanks to God in the manner laid out in this text. We are here because men and women have been consecrating their best to the service of God’s people; to their synagogues and rabbis, to their churches and pastors. We are here because men and women have been remembering the wonderful things that God has done. We are here because men and women have been celebrating Passover and the Eucharist; remembering God’s saving love in Egypt and in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We are here because men and women have been telling their children the stories of God’s love and faithfulness; because men and women have been giving thanks to God in ways that pass faith from generation to generation.

As Jesus’ followers, we are called to do the same. We are called to give our best to God. We are not simply to offer our left-overs, but to give the best of our time, talents and treasures to the God who loves and guides us. We are to reenact the Jesus’ story on a regular basis through communion as a reminder that Jesus loved us enough to give up his life for us and for the world. We are to tell these things to our children, through bedtime prayers, home rituals, Sunday school and by inviting them at the 10am service to ask the questions that shape our story. In this way, our children as they grow will remember that God is always present in their lives.

The challenge for us this Sunday then is to remember the lessons we have learned from the “I Am who I Am” school for fine finished followers, and to ask ourselves, how am giving thanks to God in such a way as to ensure that these thanks will continue to be offered by generations to come.