

“Jubilate!”

On this Sunday before Thanksgiving, I wanted to preach on something a bit more upbeat because, well, these are tough times, and I wanted to say something encouraging. And when I realized which psalm was included among our Bible readings this morning, I knew I'd have to start there, because Psalm 100 is a very upbeat piece of writing.

It appeared on my radar when I was a teenager, and a member of a youth group at church. Psalm 100 was one of the songs we sang pretty regularly, and I just enjoyed singing it. I think I liked it so much because it had such a simple message: Give thanks to God, and be grateful to Him.

When the Rev. Peter A. Butler, Jr. preached on Psalm 100, he began his sermon by saying this: “Have you ever heard someone say that they have no reason to be thankful? I was talking with a woman who was complaining on and on about everything you could possibly think of, and I said to her, ‘Why don’t you focus on the things you have to be thankful for?’ And she said, ‘I don’t have anything to be thankful for: No one has ever given me anything. I work hard for everything I get, and no one has ever helped me.’ I suggested she could be thankful that she was able to work, that she was in good enough health to work, that she had a job, and so forth. And she cursed at me. I felt very sad for her.”

Well, after reading that account, I knew I had something to be thankful for, because I don’t think I’ve ever had a parishioner who has actually cursed at me. Well, at least not to my face. But I think the good Rev. Butler might have suggested that the woman watch the old Civil War movie, *Shenandoah*. In it, Jimmy Stewart plays a widowed father of a large farm family. Although he is certainly a cranky fellow, he does have a keen sense of self-sufficiency. At the beginning of the film, he prays before each meal – but only because his wife made him promise to do so before she died – though it’s a pretty testy prayer:

“Lord, we cleared this land, we plowed it, we planted it, we harvested the crops, and we fixed the food. We worked ’till

we were dog-boned-tired. None of this would be here if it weren't for us, but thank you anyway. Amen."

When the Civil War breaks out, Jimmy Stewart's character begins to lose everything he's worked so hard for. His children have divided loyalties about the war. One son is killed. His youngest boy is captured and taken to a prisoner of war camp. His daughter dies in childbirth. In short, his life is coming apart, and there's nothing he can do about it.

However, as the war wages on, the remnants of the family still gather around the table for a meal, and Jimmy Stewart begins the old prayer: "Lord, we cleared this land, we plowed it..." but he chokes up, and can't go on. Suffering and loss, and birth and death, have finally shattered his illusion of self-sufficiency.

However, and ironically, it's precisely his loss and pain that open the door to gratitude. Toward the end of the movie, and against all hope, Jimmy Stewart's character is sitting in a church when his youngest son comes home to him. When the boy comes limping down the aisle of the church, the congregations stands, and together they sing the doxology, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow..."

And Stewart's character finally realizes that he's been looking at things all wrong. He finally understands that his body is a gift, and his children are gifts. The land is a gift, and the soil and the seed are gifts. The sun and the rain are gifts. His labors are a gift. In fact, life itself is a gift. And then, he realizes that God has given him one more gift: The capacity for gratitude.

In his book, *When the Game is Over it All Goes Back in the Box*, John Ortberg wrote:

"Gratitude is the gift God gives us that enables us to be blessed by all his other gifts, the way our taste buds enable us to enjoy the gift of food. Without gratitude, our lives degenerate into envy, dissatisfaction, and complaints, taking what we have for granted and always wanting more."

And that's why I think I like Psalm 100 so much, because it reminds me that, on those days when I can't get what I want, I can still give thanks to God, and be grateful to Him, for at least two things I do have: a wonderful family, and a wonderful parish.

When I was a teenager, my church had a really wonderful parish secretary. Her name was Sharon, and she was one of the hardest working, and one of the most faithful people, I knew. Whenever something went wrong, she would pause from whatever she was doing, take a deep breath, and finally make herself smile and say “Oh well, praise the Lord!” And every time I saw that happen, I thought to myself, “She’s a nut. She’s in denial. She should be throwing things.” But in retrospect, I think that, perhaps, she, and the author of Psalm 100, must have had an intuitive understanding of a particular aspect of human physiology and psychology. Let me explain.

It should come as no surprise if I say that people who are happy smile more than people who are unhappy. However, in 2009, the journal *Scientific American* reported on a study that seemed to suggest that, when unhappy people make themselves smile, they actually begin to feel a bit more happy. Apparently, there is a sort of communication going on between the brain and a person’s facial muscles. When a brain senses feelings of unhappiness, it sends messages to the facial muscles to form a frown. But – and this is where things start get interesting – when an unhappy person makes themselves smile, those muscles send the message to the brain, “I’m smiling, so I must be happy.” Seemingly, it works.

That’s why Psalm 100, and so many of the other psalms, work. Now, I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but the *Book of Psalms* contains 150 different hymns, poems, and prayers that cover the entire spectrum of human emotion: praise, hope, and fear; confidence, anger, and love; joy, wonder, and awe; and even – if you read the last few verses of Psalm 137 – a surprising bit of gratuitous cruelty. My point is this: no matter how you’re feeling at any particular moment in time, I can almost guarantee that there is a psalm that not only reflects your feelings, but also gives them a voice. The *Book of Psalms* may be the most pastorally-powerful book in the entire Bible.

In fact, if you’re looking for something to read during the Season of Advent, I would recommend the *Book of Psalms*. And if you own a Prayer Book, you’re in luck, because it already contains the entire *Book of Psalms*, starting on page 585, and it’s divided them up into short bits that you can read each morning and evening over the course of 30 days. Think about it.

You know, these are really tough times we’re living in, and with Thanksgiving only a few days away, a lot of people are wondering what they’ve got to be thankful for. If this sounds even a little bit like you, I have three bits of advice. First, smile

anyway; it seems to work. Second, try reading the *Book of Psalms*, or, at least, Psalm 100. And, third, come to Sunday worship.

Really? Come to worship? Yes, because the Holy Eucharist is, at its heart, a service of gratitude and thanksgiving. In fact, the word "Eucharist" comes from the Greek word which means to give thanks or to be grateful. And it's really what the whole service is about.

In the first half of our worship service, we hear readings from Scripture which describe what God has done for us, and the ways that God has tried to be with us. We respond to those readings by affirming our faith in God. And then, with that newfound confidence, we then pray for each other – in a way, we're extending that sense of vertical reconciliation we've experienced with God, and offering it, horizontally, to one another. And then we pass the Peace, and renew our relationships with each other.

In the second half of our worship service, we remember what God did for us, in the death and resurrection of Jesus. And we do that by reenacting a meal Jesus shared with his followers on the night before he died. And in the prayers that are offered, we're reminded that what God hoped to accomplish, and what God in fact *did* accomplish, was the renewal of our relationship with him. God in Christ gave his life for us, so that we, in turn, could offer our lives to each other. And then, we share in a token meal of bread and wine.

If you take nothing else away from a Sunday worship service, I hope it's this: Every time we come to church on Sundays, we are reminded that we've actually a lot to be grateful for. And that gratitude is God's gift to us.

As I've already said a couple of times already, these are tough times we're living in, and with Thanksgiving only a few days away, you may be wondering what you've got to be thankful for. Well, my hope for you, these next few days, is this: When things are the toughest, that you can pause, and remember that God has been walking with you; and that God can help you see the wonder and delight that is all around you in the world; and, finally, that God's gift of gratitude can liberate your heart from that prison of fear and uncertainty, and endow your heart with generosity and peace. Amen.