

## **An Alphabet of Grace—November 22, 2020**

**Preached by**

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### **Hebrew Scripture Reading: *Psalm 95***

O come, let us sing to the Lord;  
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!  
Let us come into God's presence with thanksgiving;  
let us make a joyful noise to the Lord with songs of praise!  
For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods.  
In God's hand are the depths of the earth;  
the heights of the mountains are also the Lord's.  
The sea is God's, and the dry land,  
which were formed by the hands of the Lord.  
O come, let us worship and bow down,  
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!  
For the Lord is our God, and we are the people of God's pasture,  
and the sheep of God's hand.  
O that today we would listen to God's voice!

### **Epistle Reading Introduction**

Today's reading is a portion of one of Paul's many letters to Corinth, written to affirm and encourage the people in their good and faithful work. He is sending folk to collect offerings being taken for the poor that will be needed in other places. Let us listen for God's word in Paul's that we might hear it fresh in our lives.

### **Epistle Reading: 2 Corinthians 9.3-13**

But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you may not prove to have been empty in this case, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be; otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—in this undertaking.\* So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you, and arrange in advance for this bountiful gift that you have promised, so that it may be ready as a voluntary gift and not as an extortion.

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written,  
'He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;  
his righteousness endures forever.'

He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.\* You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others

## **AN ALPHABET OF GRACE**

Picture it! A crisp skinned brown turkey, yet to be carved, on a platter in the center of the table, side dishes artfully arranged. A household is seated around the table, heads bowed in prayer, while a child keeps one eye open, making sure nothing happens to the drumstick. We're moving rapidly toward what is perhaps the iconic moment in American life: Thanksgiving dinner. A meal that this year we will share in the least iconic way possible in our imaginations – possibly by Zoom, possibly alone, with likely much reduced feasting at the table to accommodate the fewer people and less festive mood we might bring to the table.

However disrupted our traditions might be this year, Thanksgiving remains the single most universally celebrated holiday in our country, across all those lines of tradition, culture, faith, and history, other than, understandably, by Native Americans. And, in one form or another, regardless of spiritual practice, those celebrations all begin with the offering of thanks.

Now, call it an occupational hazard, but I pay attention to the practice of prayer, its forms, who does it, when and where. Table graces, or blessings are a particular form of prayer, and again because of what I do, I spend a fair amount of time either offering, observing, or being otherwise engaged in those rituals.

Some people say a blessing before every meal; others when they are with company or on holidays; some offer a traditional family blessing that they know by heart and for others, it's a more free-form experience. Some households take turns and others have a set "pray-er."

Having a clergy person present often changes the dynamic. I see this most often when sharing a meal in a restaurant. Salad forks turn into pasta forks, spinning aimlessly on the plate, while someone watches for a cue from me. On the other hand, I often dawdle with my beverage to see if people are expecting me to pray.

Occasionally I am invited to people's homes and the table blessing "question" arises again. The night before I candidated in my first church, there was a small dinner party. My hosts asked me to pray and I obliged. The next day, after the service and the vote, there was a celebratory picnic with the search committee. My new hosts asked me to say the blessing. Before I could respond, my hosts of the former evening said to me: "Paul [ my new boss] says that biblically, it's the host's responsibility to say the blessing."

"Why did I say the blessing at your house last night?"

"Because you didn't know yet that Paul taught us that."

So I gave every member of the search committee "one free table blessing."

Clergy are often spontaneously asked to say the blessing and we have one or more we can trot out quickly. The first year after I was ordained, my brother asked me privately JUST before the Thanksgiving meal if I would say the blessing. I appreciated the heads up and also realized he didn't know me well enough as a professional to ask earlier, fearing perhaps that I would produce a manuscript while the gravy congealed.

UCF has been unique among all the communities I have served: never once (other than the occasion when the search committee was testing me:-) have I been asked to say the meal blessing in one of your homes. Let me say “thank you.” It’s not that I object, but it is good for my spirit to hear other people pray. That is a gift of which I am deeply appreciative. Furthermore, it means you all know some of the essential truths about prayer – that while clergy may have a little more practice at spur-of-the-moment praying, we have no corner on the effectiveness, power, or language of prayer or even better access to God.

Yet, particularly when it comes to table blessing, regardless of who is doing the praying, while the words may vary slightly, the content rarely does. We offer thanks for three, maybe four “f’s” and an “h.” Food. Family. Friends. (~) Faith. Health. Those are all good things for which to give thanks. I do it myself. The only problem is we’re missing the whole alphabet of grace.

Why does that matter? Expanding our thinking about our blessings and increasing the specificity of our thanks is not necessary for God. It is good for our souls. Through intentional focus on all the blessings in our lives, we open ourselves to the potential of seeing far more of the good in our lives and being more attuned to its presence, each and every day, not just in the moments before a feast.

This might be an especially good year to explore an entire alphabet of grace, given that I suspect most of us have spent some time thinking of things for which we are normally grateful but are currently doing without. As the major holidays of our year approach we might experience more clouded spirits than we typically do.

We are likely to spend less time preparing a feast this year than in other years. Let’s use that time instead to prepare our spirits. Somewhere in your house (the refrigerator door?) hang a piece of paper with the alphabet written down the left side of the page. Encourage everyone in the house to fill in something to be thankful for beginning with one of those letters – it, of course does not have to be filled out in order. And we finally have a Z! ZOOM. Perhaps the W might make note of our wildfire victim offering and thanks that we are still able to respond to those in need. My P will be for the panda baby born at the National Zoo that I have been watching grow.

By exploring the whole alphabet of grace with specific names for God’s blessings, we’ll discover that image and story gives life to new images and story in each one of us and in those around us. We may find that know more about what we are thankful for than we might think, and, in fact, I’d be surprised if everyone doesn’t easily have more than 26 items for which to offer gratitude. There will be opportunity for laughter and tears, and new reasons to give thanks.

Even if we choose not to complete an alphabet of grace, we might remember what Meister Eckhart wrote: “If the only prayer you say in your whole life is ‘thank you,’ that would suffice.” Let us give thanks.

Perhaps, with God’s grace, we’ll discover that thanks (others’ and our own) begets thanks not just for a moment or a day, but all year long. For it is indeed inside that bounty we live all of our lives, and from its store we share with the world.

## PRAYER FOR OTHERS AND OURSELVES

Wonderful God: We are glad for the opportunity to worship as a people of faith, to remember the goodness of your creation, and to celebrate the abundance of our lives. In these days, we are reminded of the people and things that make our lives full of possibility.

We remember in our prayers all those who are lonely, who are hungry, who are hurting, whose circumstances dim their hope. We remember with gratitude all those who would be at our tables this week, with thanksgiving for their presence in our lives and look forward to the days when we shall be together again.

We ask for your comfort, strength and healing power in the lives of those we know and those whose names we will never know. We are glad that you have not made us to stand by helplessly, but have given us generous hearts and the means to share; have given us educations that we might teach; medical skills that we might heal; and trusting spirits that we might pray. Grant us your Spirit that it might continue to weave stronger connections in us between having and sharing, needing and responding, gratitude and grace. In the hope of being your ever more faithful joyful people, we pray in the name of the one who is the hope of the whole world, saying in one voice the prayer he taught us:

### THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day, our daily bread.  
Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors  
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,  
for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.