

Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost: Psalm 111

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Well, hello there! It's good to see the inside of a church again, and all y'all ain't half bad either. Now, I suspect at least some of y'all're expecting a barnburner of a sermon on all the deep and mystical things I learned during my sabbatical. All those stones had to provide the groundwork for a ton of epiphanies, foundations of faith, with chief cornerstones and shifting sands and water flowing from rocks in the desert. There's oodles of places rocks show up in the Bible. The words "rock" and "stone" show up around 500 times from Genesis to Revelation, so surely they cried out to me while I was silent.

Nope, not really. I went into the summer feeling a little bit like Jacob, stacking up stones where I felt something sacred. But that's about the extent of the direct divine connections I made. Mostly, I just liked being out there puttering in my place. I suppose I'm too close to it all to really tell ya what I learned, at least what I learned beyond the practical construction stuff. We'll cover that after Coffee Hour. I can show you how to stack stones without mortar. But I haven't gotten to the connections to faith yet. Maybe I'll get there in time, but for now, I'm still basking in the peace of the work and unending gift of a project bigger than myself. A *tangible* project, that is. See, a lot of our work in the church -- all of our work, as you so capably showed while I was out -- a lot of our work is ongoing and intangible. We very rarely see the changes we make. Our influence is real and strong, but it's invisible. Without people telling us what St. Thomas' has been for them, we simply don't know.

Actually, when I got back there to my desk, there were two thank you notes waiting. They were addressed to me, but they weren't *for* me. They were for you. Your wardens, your vestry, all you quiet helpers that made strangers' lives better for us being here. I want you to know that your work matters and is felt and is recognized, even when you can't see it. I have a stack of similar letters in my office from years of church work. That kind of gratitude is a rarity, so I hold those slips of paper close, and when my days are hard, I read one or two (or the whole stack, if it's been a real doozy), and the work seems a little more doable and a lot more important. I know y'all've heard some of my Donnie stories over the years. He's the guy down in Little Rock who drew all the wrong lots. My collection of letters of gratitude is dominated by his writing. He could be incredibly difficult, but he knew it and knew how hard helping him could be. And because of that, when someone actually did help, he knew just how badly he needed to say thanks. Not just so the person helping would know, but because he needed to do it. Expressing that gratitude is a gift in itself because it means you have something to be grateful for. Some folks keep gratitude journals or try to say thanks to someone new everyday. Whatever helps you get in the habit. We do it every week with Eucharist, which literally means Thanks-giving. But we get an extra special dose of it today with that Psalm, "I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart in the assembly of the upright, in the congregation."

Y'all, I give thanks for y'all. You did so much. You have been doing so much for years, but this summer especially, you did a lot. And I doubt you know what it has meant to folks, so I want to tell you some of what I've heard. I heard y'all did a ton with the buildings and the grounds, which ain't nothing given all the storms wreaking their havoc. I heard y'all faced some tough decisions and responded faithfully. I heard y'all fed people, that you gave them places to rest, that you found help. Y'all showed up and y'all loved. There's not much more a priest could ask for. I went into this summer knowing you'd still be around come this Sunday. I suspected the building would still be here. Beyond that, I didn't know what to expect.

What I've found is that you did all that and then some. The clergy that came to visit, they've bragged about y'all. They want to come back. Now, that may not sound like much, but let me remind you that clergy are kinda church connoisseurs. As a rule, we don't like other people's churches 'cause we're admittedly a little

liturgically snobby, myself included. I'm not proud of that, it's just how it is. Anyway, those picky priests want to come back! Y'all, that's big. I had an email waiting for me from a visitor who came one Sunday. No idea who it was or what day, but they were so grateful for the kind welcome they received when they walked in those doors. Y'all, that almost never happens. As a rule, I don't hear from random visitors. You made quite the loving impression. And some of you have taken me aside and made sure I knew just how hard other people worked. They saw you working for this place you all love and these people you all treasure, and they wanted you to get your due.

I'm sure I'll keep hearing these stories of ways each of you stepped up for a long time. It reminds me of my wedding, weirdly enough. Becca and I celebrated 14 years this summer, and I'm still finding out things family and friends did behind the scenes, some small, some enormous, all done with love to make sure our wedding day could remain ours. Y'all are just like that. You did a million things behind the scenes and out in front of God and everybody. You did a million things, some small, some enormous, all with an eye towards the needs of your community, your churchmates, your spiritual home. And for this I give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart.

I know it's gonna take a while to get my feet back under me. I've gotta brag on Leah for a second, because for most of last week, she did a fine job of reminding me what I'm supposed to be doing. I'll get the hang of it again and maybe, maybe I'll even remember my lines! But I know you folks are perfectly capable of keeping this place doing what needs doing while I find my head again. In the meantime, please, hear my gratitude. I went away to play with rocks while y'all just plain rocked! Come on, you had to know a terrible pun was coming. Anyway, I thank you. But so does Hamilton. You've laid a sure foundation we can build off of, strong and secure, without missing a step. And so it is that I give thanks with my whole heart in and for this congregation.