

*And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.*

Tomorrow is Thanksgiving Day. The feast is already being prepared. The tables will soon be set. Though it is not officially a day in the Church year, it is good to take any opportunity to remind ourselves of the good earthly gifts we have received from the hand of God. And as we give thanks to God, it serves us well to also remember all those things that don't typically come to mind when thinking about giving thanks.

Moses spoke to Israel as they were nearing the Promised Land to take possession of it, saying, "*The whole commandment that I command you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land that the LORD swore to give to your fathers.*" We can imagine the excitement of the people. Homeless, they wandered for forty years in the wilderness. During that time they experienced trial after suffering after trial. They were ready to receive the blessing of the Lord. They were ready to be in the place they belonged, in the place that they would call their own, given to them by God Himself. They were more than ready to receive God's favor!

But we can also imagine that along with the excitement comes a grave danger: to be so consumed by the gift that you completely neglect the giver. That is why Moses warns them to take extra care to follow God's command. I'm sure many of you have had the experience or can imagine a child who receives a new toy, and their parents tell them to be gentle with the toy otherwise they will break it. But, in their excitement, they barely hear their parent's words and are so caught up in play that they lose all awareness. They don't realize the force they are exerting or the stress that they are putting the toy under and next thing you know, SNAP!

And when that happens, parents are not happy. Frustrated, yes, sinfully because the toy is now broken. But ultimately saddened because of their love for their child. The gift was given to give joy to the child, but now the joy of the gift has been robbed of them by their mishandling of it. And a child who does not know of their parent's love will run and hide, afraid their parent will be angry over the broken toy. But a child who knows how much their parent loves them will go, confesses what they have done, and be comforted in a restored relationship. And the parent might even be able to fix the toy, restoring the joy to their child once more.

God gave His commandments to His people, not because He was concerned with the well-being of the land, but because of His great love for His people. He was telling them how to receive and use God's gift appropriately so that their joy may increase. So Moses warns, "*And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not.*" The previous generation proved that they would not listen to the Word of the Lord and trust in His love. God knew that the Promised Land would be mishandled and that they would not only take away their own joy, but the joy of the generations to come. So God sent them back into the wilderness where the new generation was born.

God had tested this new generation, whether they would trust His love and listen to His Word, whether they would receive the discipline of a loving Father to keep them from sin and grow in His love. "*And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.*"

And so He allowed them to experience trial and suffering. But as they remained in Him He brought them through every time. So Moses reminds them of this testing, that the Lord was in control and working all things for their good, bringing them here to this point, to the boundary to the Promised Land, ready to receive their inheritance. Moses reminded them so that when the Lord disciplined them in the future, as He surely would do in His love for them, they would continue to trust in Him and walk wherever He would lead them. And so that when they did forget to listen to the Lord and "broke" His gift, they would return to God, confessing their sins and having their relationship and joy restored by Him.

Because although the Lord was pleased to give them, give us, earthly blessings, it is not the circumstances of life that are important. Sometimes we see His blessing, and feel His blessing, in what we have family and friends, house and home, clothing and shoes, health and well-being, peace and security, and all that we need to support

this body and life. But sometimes the Lord allows these things to be taken away to help us see what is truly important: His great love for us.

Because Israel could have all the earthly blessings their little hearts desired, but the one thing that sustains them, the only thing that sustains them, is God's love. And in the moment they may not have seen it or felt it, but remembering their time of testing in the wilderness they could look back and reflect upon the love of God that was very real and present, bringing them through. *"Your clothing did not wear out on you and your foot did not swell these forty years. Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you."*

They could look back upon all they have been through and see how God had sustained them in it all. And in reflecting upon God's love they would be caught up in the Giver's love rather than the gift. That way they would be ready to receive the discipline of the Lord from a loving father, not to harm them but for their good. Even when they couldn't see the good that He was doing, they would trust in His goodness. *"So you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God by walking in his ways and by fearing him."*

*"For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing out in the valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land he has given you."*

The land that God was bringing Israel into was good. It was filled with all the things that would not only sustain their lives but bless them with the richness of His creation. And they had this all abundantly. Yet as good as that was it is still part of this fallen creation, broken by children who were careless and didn't listen to His Word, you and I included. But in His great love, God desired to restore us to Himself and restore to us the joy of the gift of the creation He has given.

But in order to truly restore the joy He restores creation itself. He promises to give us something more than this fallen creation which is wearing out and coming to an end. He promises to bring us to a land in which its resources will never wear out, in which our bodies will never tire, in which we will always see and feel His love. We will never be in danger of being distracted by the gift because there will be no sin within us. And He planted that new land, that new life in His Son. And this seed of the new creation died and was planted in the ground. And from there new creation and new life burst forth from the tomb, a promised inheritance for all who trust in God's love.

But this life is so full of abundance that a future promise could never contain it. No, that new life flows to us even now in the blood of Christ, nourishing the germinating seed of eternal life He has planted within us. As we face our own trials and sufferings in this life we can look back through our lives and see how God's love has brought us through all things as it carries us toward that day when the new creation and new life are fully revealed. When we reflect upon our lives, we can even see the Lord's loving discipline as He makes us ready to receive that final, eternal inheritance. And that strengthens us for another day, another trial, walking wherever the Lord leads.

And as we follow Him, one step in front of the other, before we realize it we will be there, in the Lord's presence, where He has not only prepared His table but a feast, a rich feast, a feast overflowing, a feast that will never end. So let us give thanks for the Lord's love, even giving thanks for His discipline, as He brings us through by the blood of Christ into everlasting life. Amen.