

GRACIOUS LIVING

Pentecost 21/Thanksgiving – Cycle C: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Luke 17:11-19

It's a phrase that I've seen in real estate ads for luxury accommodations, and it's the name of an extremely successful outdoor equipment, outdoor furniture, and storage solutions company in Woodbridge, Ontario. "Gracious living," it seems, has a lot of appeal, especially, I suppose, if there are aspects of your domestic conditions that are less than ideal. Buy this house, move into this condo, purchase this patio furniture. choose this kayak or toboggan or tent – and live the dream! Being comfortable, knowing that your outdoor furniture is comfortable, stylish, and will last, having a state-of-the-art snowboard, or de-cluttering by having cupboards and drawers and shelving to organize all the messy corners of your house or apartment promises such peace of mind that life will be gracious in every detail.

Probably not. But the promise of our consumer society is precisely that: specifically that our needs and desires can be satisfied by acquiring whatever we don't have. A real estate agent said to Paula and me after we had bought our first home, "I don't sell houses, I sell dreams. A house is just a house, but my clients all carry dreams about the kind of place they imagine as their home. My job is to find a property that comes close enough to their ideals that they'll buy it." Thinking of his comment, I recognize that it is no accident that the Kitchener-Conestoga Rotary Club doesn't sell tickets each year on a luxury house, although that is exactly what they build and furnish. No, they call it a "dream home"; and the dream they offer for a mere \$100 ticket or three for \$250 is "gracious living".

Part of the appeal to the phrase "gracious living" is its ambiguity. Graciousness in our relationships with others promises much greater happiness on a day-to-day basis than owning a certain product or property. In this understanding of the word, "gracious" means "kind" and represents a generosity of spirit in people we encounter only too rarely it seems. Thanksgiving is, typically, a gracious time of sanctuary in our busy lives. The Thanksgiving Weekend allows us the opportunity to set aside time from work to intentionally spend time with friends and loved ones. We often prepare or are invited to a special meal with foods that take the longer-than-usual amount of time to prepare: turkey takes several hours to cook; rutabaga or turnip requires more work to prepare than most vegetables; and a pumpkin pie, if we make it from scratch, can be a longer-than-normal project. But we love the traditions, because they provide us an opportunity to savour not only the special foods, but also the company of those who are dear to us. And for Canadians, we connect the grace we enjoy around the Thanksgiving table with the grace of an abundant harvest. We call our celebrations "harvest home" or "harvest thanksgiving", and we offer prayers of thanksgiving to the Creator for the food that springs from the earth for our nurture and sustenance. People of faith make connections with our gracious God and the grace we experience in growing food from tiny seeds in a climate and in a land that is ideal for all kinds of agriculture. God provides for our gracious living, and we take our place in millennia-old harvest celebrations in a wide variety of religious traditions when we offer our prayers and sing our praises of thanksgiving. And a gracious God beckons *our* graciousness: Thanksgiving prompts our concern for our neighbours who live in poverty. The Thanksgiving Food Drive and the Canadian Lutheran World Relief Sweater Drive seek to raise our consciousness about injustice, both in our own community and, right now, in Syria. Millions have fled their homes to live in refugee camps in Jordan: in a few weeks the sweaters we have donated this Thanksgiving weekend will keep warm the communities of refugees who now call Jordan home. Our challenge is not to forget about injustice, and to work in many different ways to counter injustice in our communities near and far, all year round. Last Sunday afternoon, the Church of Scotland theologian and musician, John Bell, presented a workshop at Glen Morris United Church. One of the songs he has collected, an Argentinian hymn "God Bless to Us Our Bread," contains this prayer: "Lord Jesus, you enjoyed good food and enjoyed going to parties. Help us to appreciate food as you did, to share food, and to enjoy eating with other people. And like you, may we never be truly happy until all the hungry people are fed." Praying such prayers, making them our own, keeps our faith from being personal and individual: they release us into the community and lead us to become people for others, to live graciously *with one another* in a world that is too often characterized by oppression and greed. The Gospel record of Jesus' feeding of the four or five thousand is a sign of the quality of life to which Jesus calls people: enough for everybody to eat their fill – and then some! "Lord Jesus, like you, may we never be truly happy until all the hungry people are fed."

Two of our readings today model gracious living.

The reading from Jeremiah is unexpected, to say the least. To read Jeremiah's prophecy is to hear his call to the people of Judah to repent or face exile; to turn away from the lure of nationalism and recall their identity as the children of the One God; to rely radically on God's saving grace instead of their own notions of greatness. Jeremiah's counsel, it seems, fell on deaf ears. In our reading two weeks ago, Babylon besieged Jerusalem and removed the people of Judah from their homeland. Last Sunday's reading personified the emptied-out Jerusalem as an abandoned princess, forsaken by all who had loved her and had sworn their loyalty. But today, the word of the Lord through Jeremiah's pen is a message to the exiles to live graciously in Babylon, to make the best of things, to do as they could have done earlier and trust radically in God's faithfulness and goodness. "Take wives and have sons and daughters," we read. "...Multiply there, and do not decrease...Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare, you will find your welfare."

Jeremiah could say the same to us in our post-modern society in which Christians, without stretching the point, are very much exiles. In spite of this reality, Jeremiah would urge us to live graciously in this strange environment: to, as much as possible, embody the grace of God; seek the welfare of our city, our country, our world, and pray to the Lord on its behalf.

Our Gospel, today, provides an example of the opposite. Ten lepers call out to Jesus to show mercy on them, to heal them. Without hesitation, Jesus responds, commanding them to follow the ritual in Leviticus prescribed for those who have been healed. Unlike so many who come to Jesus for healing, these ten comply immediately, and as they head out to find a priest, they are healed. Only one, we learn is gracious. Only one stops dead in his tracks as asks, "What just happened here?" connects the dots, and returns to Jesus to give thanks. The nine are not gracious; the nine appear to be self-consumed and will do what they agreed to do – but nothing more. The one who returns to Jesus to give thanks is a Samaritan, a foreigner, not part of the cultural mainstream, and part of a community held in disdain by the Jews. Perhaps because the Samaritan was someone who, by definition, had no status in this context, he was able to be more "in his skin" (so to speak) than were the others. Suffering, not just physical suffering, but existential suffering as the outcast of the outcasts, caused him to appreciate his healing and restoration whereby he *felt* the grace he had just received. That day, that moment, he not only experienced grace, he embodied it by returning and giving thanks.

Yesterday, about 150 people gathered at Calvin Presbyterian Church on Westmount Road West in Kitchener to celebrate the 90th birthday of Lorna vanMossel. Some of you may know Lorna as a retired citizenship judge appointed about 30 years ago by then-Minister of Citizenship and Immigration and Waterloo MP, Walter McLean. The room at Calvin was filled with people of all ages, all colours, and all faiths. The Mayor of Kitchener came to present a citation to Lorna on behalf of the City of Kitchener – for all the good work she had accomplished in our community in settling newcomers and building bridges of understanding and acceptance in our community. Before there was a multi-cultural centre, there was Lorna who had, with a few others, created a multi-cultural society. Mayor Carl Zehr said to her, "Is there anything you want to say to me at this time." "Never forget about the refugees," replied Lorna. Carl said, "She squeezed my knee hard, so I know she meant it."

Lorna has been a member of the Kitchener-Waterloo Council of Churches for almost as long as I have. In our birthday greeting to her we said, "Life in K-W has been deeply enriched by all you have contributed to our community, especially through your concern for refugees, newcomers, and the many who live on the fringes of society. We thank God for your perennial graciousness and your holy example of discipleship.

Gracious living. It's not about living out our dreams of luxury and comfort. It's about being the gracious people of our gracious God. It's opening our arms in welcome. It's acknowledging that all that we have and all that we are is from the hand of the One who came to serve and not to be served.