

## “A Hero’s Gratitude”

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It happened every Friday just before sunset: an old man walked along the beach, the waves lapping at his bare feet, the South Florida Gulf breezes playing with the brim of his floppy hat. In his gnarled fingers he clutches the bail of a bucket, full of shrimp.

He approaches a fishing pier, and begins the long walk out the end of the pier, where he stands and waits. He doesn't wait long. Soon they begin to come in—at first just tiny specks against the golden sky. Then a flapping motion can be detected, and soon, hundreds of sea gulls share the end of the pier with him—sitting on the railing, waddling along the plank floor, flapping and hovering just over his head—as he begins to feed them from the bucket of shrimp.

Soon, the shrimp are gone, but the old man and the sea gulls linger, seeming to savor the moment—almost a sacred moment, not unlike Holy Communion.

Now, hold that image in your minds.

As I read the text this morning, listen especially for all the reasons the psalmist finds to give thanks to God. Count them, if you can:

### Psalm 65:1-13 (NRSV)

**Praise is due to you,**

**O God, in Zion;**

**and to you shall vows be performed,**

**<sup>2</sup> O you who answer prayer!**

**To you all flesh shall come.**

**<sup>3</sup> When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us,  
you forgive our transgressions.**

**<sup>4</sup> Happy are those whom you choose and bring near  
to live in your courts.**

**We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house,  
your holy temple.**

**<sup>5</sup> By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance,  
O God of our salvation;  
you are the hope of all the ends of the earth  
and of the farthest seas.**

**<sup>6</sup> By your<sup>[a]</sup> strength you established the mountains;  
you are girded with might.**

**<sup>7</sup> You silence the roaring of the seas,  
the roaring of their waves,  
the tumult of the peoples.**

**<sup>8</sup> Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs;  
you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy.**

**<sup>9</sup> You visit the earth and water it,  
you greatly enrich it;**

**the river of God is full of water;  
you provide the people with grain,  
for so you have prepared it.  
10 You water its furrows abundantly,  
settling its ridges,  
softening it with showers,  
and blessing its growth.  
11 You crown the year with your bounty;  
your wagon tracks overflow with richness.  
12 The pastures of the wilderness overflow,  
the hills gird themselves with joy,  
13 the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,  
the valleys deck themselves with grain,  
they shout and sing together for joy.**

And listen to these words from Paul's greeting to the church at Ephesus. they express the undiluted joy that results when a people recognize that God is in their presence and is actively involved in their lives:

*EPHESIANS 1:3 (GNB) Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places...*

How sensitive are we—how quickly do we discern the ways God blesses us? Have we become so conditioned by consumerism—the idea that “the customer is always right”; and we’re the customers (even in church)—are we so accustomed to the culture of instant gratification (or even *constant* gratification)—are we so jaded by the spectacular—the wide-screen, Technicolor stereophonic sound—that we miss the simple joys God sends our way?

It was Thanksgiving Sunday, and the Sunday School teacher was asking her third-graders the things for which they were thankful. “My puppy.” “My Momma and my Daddy.” “My Play Station 4.” The usual things...

And then Dennis said, “I’m thankful for my glasses.” This was a good Sunday School teacher, who recognized a “teachable moment” when it presented itself, so she asked Dennis if he could explain. After all it was a rather mature response for a third grader, and she expected something like, they help me see the blackboard in school.

She was surprised when Dennis said, “Because they keep the boys from hitting me and the girls from kissing me!” (It’s all a matter of perspective, isn’t it?)

How sensitive are we—how quickly do we discern the ways God blesses us?

We were in southern Jordan, below the Dead Sea. It was hot; virtually a desolate wasteland; and we had walked or ridden horseback about a mile through a narrow cut in the mountain to the ancient city of Petra. We had returned to the bus to eat our box lunches. The bus air conditioner was not working well; our box

lunches turned out to be stale sandwiches. The apples were warm, as was the bottled water. And we spoiled American tourists were complaining.

Our guide, a Christian Arab, said to me, "I want to show you something," and we walked several feet from the bus. There in a landscape virtually barren of all vegetation, in a crack between some rocks was a tiny weed, with three tiny blossoms about the size of my fingernail.

"Look at that," he said to me. "Isn't that beautiful? Isn't life amazing?"

We saw the rocks and felt the heat and complained about the temperature of our apples. He saw the flower in the crack between some rocks.

How sensitive are we—how quickly do we discern the ways God blesses us?

In October, 1942 a B-17 bomber headed across the Pacific on a courier mission. World War I hero, Captain Eddie Rickenbacker was a passenger on the plane. His assignment was to inspect several installations, and to deliver a stern rebuke from President Harry Truman to General Douglas MacArthur. A storm hit, and the plane became lost. Eventually, it ran out of fuel and ditched in the ocean.

Through the heroic efforts of Captain Rickenbacker, all of the seven crew members made it safely aboard a life raft. They managed to get out of the plane with plenty of water; but with only a couple of days of food. Even by rationing the food, it was soon gone, and the crew grew weak as their ordeal dragged on for days. One of the crew members died on the 13<sup>th</sup> day, and Rickenbacker was fearful for all their survival.

One morning he was awakened by something on his hat. He reached up quickly and snared it with his hand. It was a sea gull. They ate the meat, although each had only a few bites. They unraveled threads from a uniform, used a pin to fashion a hook, and used the bird's intestines as bait, and caught fish, and thus survived for twenty-four days, before they finally were rescued.

Where the gull came from was a mystery. They were hundreds of miles from land, and gulls virtually never get more than a few miles from land.

But Eddie Rickenbacker never forgot the source of their survival; so, for as long as he could walk, every Friday at sundown, he made that walk out to the end of that long pier, with a bucket of shrimp, to say, "Thank you."

Today, God wants us to know that *in our union with Christ he has blessed us by giving us every spiritual blessing in the heavenly world*. And God wants us to gather every Sunday, "In Christ"—and not just the third Thursday in November—to say, "Thank you."