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Date: November 26, 2017
Sermon Title: A Football Player's Reminder
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Deuteronomy 8:6-14

Deuteronomy 8:6-14

Therefore 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 with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in 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 where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. You shall eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land that he has given you.

Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

America has been absorbed by the controversy surrounding the American flag, the national anthem, and professional football players kneeling these last few months. Let me offer a little background. Our government began paying NFL football teams to stage ever more elaborate patriotic displays at football games. We see bigger and ever bigger flags spread across the field, honor guards, veterans, and celebrity singers performing "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Two years ago, Colin Kaepernick, a fairly successful but then-injured quarterback for the San Francisco team, began to kneel during the national anthem as a personal protest against police violence toward young black men. Nobody really noticed because he was injured, and in our celebrity world, you're not a star if you're not playing. And if you're not playing, nobody's

watching you. But when he started to play again, he kept kneeling. People noticed and took offense . . . and this year no professional football team would employ him.

So, beginning this season, lots of players began kneeling, more people took offense, the president tweeted his disgust; more players knelt in protest, more people took offense, boycotts started. And maybe it's all to the good.

I teach six classes a month on "Religion in the News," and this football/flag/kneeling/patriotism controversy has been a big topic. We've had some terrific conversations about what the flag means, what the national anthem means, what their roles are at a football game; about police violence and racism and protests. What's the right way to protest? Or the wrong way?

But this is not what my sermon is about. This sermon is inspired by an article in the *New York Post* about a linebacker for the New York Jets, Demario Davis. He's part of a group of football players who met with the owners to try to find a path beyond this controversy. When he left the meeting, he told the reporters, "I would say the talks were very productive. It's encouraging to me as an athlete to see so many athletes and owners so concerned about our country and pushing in the right direction. We have a tremendous platform in the NFL," he said, and then he added, "to whom much is given, much will be required." The newspaper didn't put that in quotes, but it sounded as though the football player knew he was quoting Jesus. (Willis, George. "Jets Have Become More Unified During Anthem Protest Debate." *NYP* 10/19/17 p. 59)

Jesus says that in the Gospel of Luke after a long teaching, when he makes it clear that every single one of us had better take good care of the opportunities and advantages we have. We all have talents, gifts, chances that come our way. And whether you have a little or a lot, you'd better use it well. And what's more (and Jesus is very emphatic about this), the more you've got, the more you'd better measure up. *To whom much is given, much will be required.*

The football player, Demario Davis, was only stating the obvious in Christian language. He is a professional football player in a sports-crazy nation, followed by millions of fans who want to know what he eats for breakfast, whom he dates, where he goes on vacation. He's a celebrity. Football players have brief careers, but while you're playing, people care intensely and passionately about you. And in quoting Jesus, he recognizes that each of us has a responsibility to make the most of our lives.

Coming out of a tough life in rural Mississippi, almost lost to the world of drugs, Demario Davis chose football and Christ, determined to do the best with both.

So imagine that young man at the top of his career, sitting in the locker room at the MetLife Stadium, realizing his life has been flooded with blessings and trying to figure out how to give back, how to use his blessings, how to maximize his opportunity.

That's a pretty good message for Thanksgiving, don't you think? How do we best express our gratitude? How do we best show God and the world that we really understand how blessed we are? How do we best make use of the opportunities unique to us? Which brings us to that marvelous Scripture lesson we just heard.

The Book of Deuteronomy is one of the five foundational books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. Often called "the Books of Moses," or "the Torah," they give us the back-story to Israel, from Creation to Adam and Eve to Moses and the escape from Egypt, all the laws to govern our lives and becoming the "Chosen People" in the "Promised Land." In the verses for today, Moses tells the people of Israel not to forget who you are, where you came from, how you got here.

That's a recurring theme in the Old Testament, God reminding Israel not to get so high and mighty, so arrogant, so vain, that they forget their roots. And so, God gets specific: "I called you into being," God says. "I made you, I got you out of Egypt, I led you through the wilderness, I fed you, I brought you to this land."

And then Moses adds some detail that every American should take to heart. "The Lord your God brought you into a good land, a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil, and honey, and a land where bread will not be scarce, and you will lack nothing." (Deuteronomy 8:6-14)

It's impossible to be in America and *not* see how blessed we are. Whatever a nation could possibly need to prosper, from constitutional freedoms to earthbound resources, we have it in abundance. We don't always use them well, but God could easily say to America what God said to Israel: "You've got it all, use it well."

Some who claim to be patriots boast that "the USA is the greatest country in the history of the world." Maybe so, maybe not, maybe not yet . . . But we've got all it takes to be the greatest country in the history of the world.

The football player was just reminding us that with that boast comes great responsibility, and Moses was just warning us not to get fat and sassy and think we did it all ourselves. (vs. 14)

That reminds me of two phrases, one stupid, and the other I like. The stupid phrase is "a self-made man." There's no such thing. Any so-called "self-made man" is forgetting some teacher (as we discussed last week); some parent who never gave up on him; some spouse who stood beside him; some mentor who took him under their wing; some investor who believed in him; and maybe God, who did a lot more maneuvering than he'll ever know . . . or admit.

The phrase I really like is a criticism of the "self-made man." It says that such a person "was born on third base and think he's hit a triple." In other words, someone else did all the work, and he wants to take all the credit.

If this sermon is any good, you are starting to see a connection. I made three points today:

No. 1, the football player quotes Jesus to remind us all, "To whom much is given, much is required."

No. 2, Moses reminds us, "Don't forget who we are, where we came from, how we got here . . . Don't forget your roots."

No. 3, my little phrase reminds us we all build ourselves on the shoulders of others.

All three points require humility and lead to gratitude. And we can apply all three points to our nation, to ourselves, to our Church, and plenty more.

The football player was thinking on all three levels. He was speaking for himself as an American, as a successful person, and as a Christian. "To whom much is given, much is required." He is saying, in effect, I live in a nation of greatness and of imperfections, so I thank God for the greatness, and I owe it to God to work on the imperfection.

At the end of Church today we'll sing an old hymn, perfect for today:

*Count your blessings, name them one by one.
Count your blessings, see what God hath done.*

It's not a happy, sappy Pollyanna hymn. The verses fully describe daily life's ups and downs:

*When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed,
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost . . .
Are you ever burdened with a load of care?
Does the cross seem heavy you are called to bear?*

Verse 3 raises the ups and downs together:

*So, amid the conflict, whether great or small,
Do not be discouraged, God is over all.*

So, in that hymn, you've got life's billows, tempests, discouragement, burdens and crosses to bear, conflicts great and small. A fairly accurate description of America, 2017, wouldn't you say? Of the world, 2017? Of our personal lives, if not day to day, certainly week to week? Yet the hymn offers an antidote. Every verse and every chorus after every verse hammers home the same Thanksgiving message:

Count your blessings, name them one by one.

Isn't that the message of God in Deuteronomy? And the message of the football player in the locker room?

Count your blessings, name them one by one.

And once you've counted them, once you see how much you you've been given, you'll understand how much God rightfully requires of you.

The key is specificity. Count your blessings. Name them one by one. Make a list. Keep a tally. Itemize. I want to repeat: this is not happy, sappy Pollyanna (although "Pollyanna" was one of my favorite movies). But to be grateful is not a denial of reality.

The New York Times on Wednesday had a powerful, heart-wrenching article with the jolting headline, "After 'So Much Sadness,' What Is There to Be Thankful For?" It was tough. It covered people facing Thanksgiving Day "across an America battered by wildfires, hurricanes, and mass shootings."

They wrote, "Can you imagine Thanksgiving in the burned-out neighborhoods of California, in the totally devastated Puerto Rico, in the emotional ruins of Sutherland, Texas, in the flood-ravaged streets of Houston, along the gilded streets of Las Vegas, even along the bicycle path in lower Manhattan across from the World Trade Center?"

One family who lost everything in the wildfires of Santa Rosa, California, talked about their family tradition, every November, of "making a 'gratitude tree' that the mom and her kids would foliate with paper leaves describing everything they were grateful for. *"Not this year," she said, "I don't have it in me."* (Healey, Jack and Turkewitz, Julie. "After 'So Much Sadness,' What Is There to Be Grateful For?" *The New York Times*. 11/22/17.)

That old hymn, "Count Your Blessings," may seem as if it's made for the Houston Astros, who had an incredible year and a spectacular World Series, for whom everything is just hunky dory! But the hymn is actually meant for that mom in Santa Rosa, California, and for you and me. We are reminded by the football player, by Moses, by the hymn, to "make a 'gratitude tree' and foliate it with paper leaves describing everything we're grateful for. And name them, one by one."

This is not an avoidance of reality. It's a strategy for reality. The football player is telling us once you sit down and imagine all your blessings, picture them, name them, honor them, then, doggone it, you are ready to take on the world. Change what needs to be changed. Fix what needs to be fixed. Heal what needs to be healed. Love what needs to be loved. Gratitude will do that for you.

Now, maybe we're ready to sing that old hymn:

Count Your Blessings

*When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed,
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,
Count your many blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.*

Refrain:

*Count your blessings, name them one by one;
Count your blessings, see what God hath done;
Count your blessings, name them one by one;
Count your many blessings, see what God hath done.*

*Are you ever burdened with a load of care?
Does the cross seem heavy you are called to bear?
Count your many blessings, ev'ry doubt will fly,
And you will be singing as the days go by.*

[Refrain]

*When you look at others with their lands and gold,
Think that Christ has promised you His wealth untold;
Count your many blessings, money cannot buy
Your reward in heaven, nor your home on high.*

[Refrain]

*So, amid the conflict, whether great or small,
Do not be discouraged, God is over all;
Count your many blessings, angels will attend,
Help and comfort give you to your journey's end.*

[Refrain]