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The Empty Hand

“for the LORD your God will bless you in all your produce and in all your undertakings, and you shall surely celebrate.

They shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed; all shall give as they are able, according to the blessing of the LORD your God that he has given you.”

Deut. 16: 15b, 16b, 17

The Bible quote I just read is about Moses handing down instruction about celebrations to the Jewish people. In fact, the entire fifth book of the Bible is nothing else but a will, a testament for the following generations that govern all aspects of their lives. An essential part of that life is the events of religious practices, and within that the holidays that celebrate God.

The holiday that celebrated the harvest of the produce was called the Festival of Tents by the Jews, and the celebrated merrily for seven days. The celebration wasn't only about eating and drinking, but also about them giving thanks in gratitude to God who blessed their undertakings.

The worship, and a sacrifice of produce or prime livestock, were a part of the expression of gratitude. Moses had left word that no one ought to come before the Lord empty handed, but all should give according to one's ability, or according to the blessing they received.

Even in his time there must have been worrisome competition when it came to the magnitude and the quality of the sacrifices. The wealthy could give more and did give more, while the poor may have felt ashamed and humiliated, because of their meager offerings. At the end neither of them leaves cheery and peaceful; The wealthy might feel conceited and pompous, and the poor might feel sad and embarrassed. The parable of Jesus and the widow's two coins suggests that the differences in offerings had continuously been practiced for a long time.

On this day of Fall Thanksgiving, surrounded by the hustle and bustle of downtown Kolozsvár, I find it somewhat difficult to get in tune with the celebration, even though the communion table is full of the produce of the land. Growing up in a small village, this

holiday meant the smell of hay in the barn, the noise of carriages loaded with produce, and the world of sparkling colors in the vegetable garden. What can we possibly do with this holiday as urbanites whose lives are far removed from the fields and agricultural labor?

My first thought here is that while we became remote from the fields, but that fertile soil is not completely separated from us, as it is feeding and nourishing us, as it has always done so. My second thought here is that we ought to give thanks not only for the crops in the fields, but also for the fruits of our lives. I call on you, my brethren, let us contemplate the words of Moses as we take an account of the blessings we received this year.

The statement about the empty hand doesn't need much of an explanation. When we visit somebody, we make an effort to bring a gift, and when someone visits us, we expect, somewhat subconsciously, that they don't show up empty handed. Our kids sometime put us into an awkward position when they openly express that expectation. You, too, might have experienced the uncomfortable situation where the guests have barely stepped across the door, and the kids ask point blank: what did you bring?

As adults we may not say it out loud, our inner child always expects something. This unspoken, unexpressed expectation is not about the size of the gift, or the usefulness of it, but it is about the relationship of the guest and the host. If someone brings me a gift, or if I bring a gift to someone else, then there is a relationship between us. When I try to think what gift might be the most appropriate, I put an effort into that. It is never the gift itself that is important, but, rather, the very act of gift giving.

The expression "empty hand" is not only about the body part that is not holding a physical object. When we reflect on our own lives, we may observe that the biggest gifts in our lives were not objects. In our lives we may have come across many who came with their hands full, yet they left disappointment and void in their wake. Some others came with their hands empty, but they still enriched our lives and our souls. The allegory of the empty hand becomes truly sad and grim only when it is accompanied by a barren soul.

Moses was speaking about physical gifts that ought to be offered to God by the faithful Jews; there the empty hand was a sign of ungratefulness toward God, the very source of all gifts.

The people of the 21st century express their gratitude not by sacrificing prime livestock, or by offering produce, but by the gifts of the soul that we express through our way of life and through our actions. An empty hand, with a soul filled with Spirit, would be a great way to give thanks to God.

However, before we could give thanks, we must be able to acknowledge our blessings; those blessings that are gifted to us by God according to our abilities. It could be a challenge to recognize them, because we are always dissatisfied, as we frequently feel

that something is missing from our blessings. Those who have many blessings want even more, and those with few blessings are disgruntled. The young is jealous of the relaxed days of the old, and the old resents the vitality and the lofty hopes of the young. Sometimes we grumble that for all our hard work, for our sleepless nights, for our constant efforts our Father could send a few more blessings for us, and for our children. Therein lies the explanation of our gratefulness or our dissatisfaction, and our contentment or our gripes.

Our lives may be compared to a mathematical equation: there is a non-variable and a variable component. The non-variable is God himself who is always there for us with His love and providence, and to bless our undertakings. Then, there is the variable, the people, ourselves, our abilities, our dreams and hopes. When, sometimes, we feel that it is impossible to be thankful, it is our fault, and not God's. A few years ago I agreed to escort an American visitor group made up mostly of older individuals. Among them was a kind and cheerful lady who, as I found out, was born in the same year and month as my mother, who by then had been resting in the Nagyajta cemetery for 10 years. Right there such an envy and bitterness filled my heart, that I felt physically unwell. I brooded over the thought that if my mother wasn't born to be a Transylvanian country folk, but an American citizen surrounded by all that comfort, my mother might still be alive. Some time had to pass before I could see and comprehend that my mother was gift in my life for almost seven decades, and that I ought to be thankful for God for such benevolence. The non-variable always remain steady, but we can change ourselves and our reactions, and the path to recognize all that sometimes leads us through suffering.

When we feel that we are missing out on God's blessings we are not looking for them where we ought to, or we are not receiving them in the manner or at the time we would wish. We expect blessings where we haven't worked for it, or, when we do receive blessings, we don't appreciate them, and we want more of it, or we want a different kind of blessing. We can be truly grateful only when we are at peace with ourselves, when we acknowledge the limits to our abilities and to our potentials, and when we don't wish for something more and bigger than our possibilities allow.

We could say along with God: we are who we are; and when we comprehend that we can begin to gain sight of the blessings of our lives.

As a 10 year old no matter how much I wish to act like an adult, I can't, because I'm not an adult. I have loving parents, grandparents, teachers, friends whose presence are all blessings. I am thankful.

As a 20 year old I'm told the entire world is mine to take, but I feel insecure and threatened. My loved ones support me, I have a healthy body and soul, and the baked-in-the-cinder biscuits are made for me.

As a 40 year old I have not redeemed the world, and most likely I never will. However, I do have a family, my spouse and children; it is my obligation and responsibility to raise them and start them off on their paths. I am thankful.

As a 60 year old I am seeing that I carried out only a few of the many plans in my life, but I still have strength, faith and perseverance, and the will to see them through. I have children, grandchildren, I have a future. I am thankful.

As an 80 year old I look back at all the happiness and the ordeals of my life. It is hard to cope with my illnesses, the consequences of old age, the loneliness, but I learn and teach every day, if there is anyone who listens. I am thankful.

As a unitarian, my faith was passed down to me as a gift by my parents and by our ancestors. I am not alone; I belong to a community. While I have to fight my daily battles in my individual and community life to maintain my existence as a follower of the teachings of Jesus, I am thankful.

My brothers and sisters, as you just heard, we need very little to be thankful, to recognize the blessings in our lives. This is not rocket science; we just have to know and accept our abilities with its limitations. Once we accomplish that, once we accept ourselves as we are, once we recognize our Father's blessings in our lives, then we will be able to repay it. Then we will not come empty handed into the house of the Lord, as we are bringing the best of our lives, our actions, our kindness, according to our own abilities. Then it will not matter who brought what or how much, what matters is how I, a child of God, by taking advantage of my abilities, have allowed the outpouring of His blessings in my life. His blessings are ever present in the lives of all of us, even when we are stumbling blindly and full of fear, or when we are thrashing in the web of ungratefulness and sorrow.

Let us then recognize the blessings in our lives, and that we and others are, or could become, blessings in each other's lives. Then we will be joyful about each day, about each possibility, and about the times we spend together. Then we will be joyful about the produce of the land, and about the fruits of the soul and love. Then we will be able to grasp and discover the blessings at each stage of our lives, the blessings in the hardships that forces us to coexist and to spur us to persevere, the blessings of successes that fortifies our faith and hope, and the blessings of kindness and forgiveness that promise a future.

Gratitude can be the only outcome of such discoveries. Gratitude toward God; gratitude toward our loved ones. Gratitude for life and its incredible gifts. Gratitude for our existence, as people, as companions, as children, as parents, as pupils of Jesus. Gratitude for our daily bread, gratitude for visitors to our sickbeds, gratitude for soothing words, and gratitude for His grace.

May the eternal God bless our lives, bless our celebration, so we can be joyful about His gifts, and so we may strive with a grateful heart to become blessings ourselves all the days of our lives. Amen.