

THANKS GIVING NOVEMBER 18, 2018 THE REV. BRIAN BACKSTRAND

5 The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot.

6 The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;

I have a goodly heritage. (Lines from Psalm 16, today's psalm.)

The other day I found myself in a phone conversation with my Hebrew Studies Professor of years long past--an individual who has done a lot of scholarly work with Jewish-Christian dialogue and who is now 94. Fred and his wife Betty live in a retirement center on the north side of Chicago, having moved just six years ago from their home of approximately 60 years located about one mile away. The lines from Psalm 16 -- *The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage*-- were paraphrased by my friend Fred over the telephone. Fred told me that he and Betty are happy to be settled where they are; that there are good people around them who care; that despite health concerns from time to time, life is good; that life itself is still enjoyable. He could have said in all these things *I have a goodly heritage*.

This past year, Fred and Betty celebrated their 70th wedding anniversary and before the reception he told everyone that there were to be no gifts. He said, *I told them that I wanted everyone to start saving for our diamond anniversary in five years, our 75th!*

A sense of humor, hope, and a perspective of gratitude. It seems as though my professor of old and my friend is living out part of the wisdom tradition of the Hebrew scriptures--the scriptures that he so devotedly loves.

Gratitude is a spiritual quality that we heard Joseph Bruchac speak of during his time at our combined service in early September. In beautiful

cadences, Joseph placed before us the simplest and essential things to take stock of, to fathom, to stop and examine, to recognize and acknowledge and to incorporate into a perspective of thanks-giving.

And now just ahead comes our national holiday of Thanksgiving. Families will gather, often coming together across great distances. And in the midst of reunion and of often traditional fare, there lurks that idea that here as well we also are invited to pause, to recognize and acknowledge those things in the midst of life that --day in and day out-- we assume, we consume, we fail to see.

For some, the approaching holiday will be difficult in the extreme, filled with challenges. For people in California still searching for loved ones, the giving of thanks will be very difficult, almost impossible. For people living with a recent diagnosis of cancer or some other life challenging health issue, the giving of thanks will also be challenging to summon up. For people living with the searing memory of gunfire --even in churches and synagogues--the giving of thanks will also be truly hard.

Nevertheless it still will be possible to give thanks. Perhaps at times even because of or in the midst of these things. For people whose lives have been eradicated by flames, meals will be served by strangers who will become friends in the moment. For those living with profound health concerns as families gather, there will be invitations to savor the one moment of togetherness with family. And even in the midst of grief and loss--even in the midst of families gathering around a table with an empty chair, a candle and just a picture, meals will be served, remembrances offered, solidarity expressed and perhaps a way forward explored. Some people will ask themselves in some of these moments, what would those missing want me to do, to think, to be? To have as a bearing, a posture going forward? And many will press on.

*The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places* is not a line from a Psalm of thanksgiving. It is not a line intended to be delivered in a time

settled and comfortable. Rather it is a line from a Psalm delivered to a people in a time of fear and uncertainty. A disruptive and distracting time. And it is thrust forward, this line, as an invitation to trust in God; to draw back and be hopeful even in uncertain and challenging times.

In those times, times of challenge, times in which we feel distraught, this Psalm reminds us of the presence of the Holy One: **The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot.**

In all of our times, both comfortable and challenging, both recent and remote, may the Lord our God be indeed our chosen portion and our cup. And may the giving of thanks and the perspective of gratitude not be cursory. May instead it surround us, clothe us, and comfort us in the midst of our living-- on good days and on bad.

In the name of God-- Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.