

Confession:

At a time when small and local businesses
are suffering from the economic losses
due to the pandemic,
I still went to Hobby Lobby.

It was a random weekend in August
And I wanted some fake eucalyptus
for our dining room table.
I didn't occur to me to think about
how many people would be there...
it was a just random Saturday afternoon:
as in, not too close to Halloween or Thanksgiving or Christmas.
Just mid-August.
But holy moly - was it packed.
I've never been in Hobby Lobby when it was this crowded
It actually made me slightly nervous.
Mostly because I haven't been around
that many people in months.

When I got into line to pay for my faux foliage,
people were respectfully spaced about 6ft apart.
Most everyone had masks.
But it took 30 minutes to get through that line!

So, while I stood there,
I had ample time to look at the fall harvest displays.
Lots of red, yellow, orange and brown.
Lots of leaves, scarecrows, turkeys *and pumpkins*.
And lots of décor that had phrases and words like,
Give Thanks; Blessed; Gather.
At first, I didn't think anything about it.
I mean Hobby Lobby
carries all kinds of stuff like this.
And plenty of us have words on wooden signs
like that in our homes.

But then I paused:
 thinking about those words
 in the midst of where we are right now;
 in the midst of a crisis
 that feels like ground hog day.

A crisis where it can be hard to *give thanks*,
 where we sometimes feel *blessed* -
 but are more often stressed.
 And especially when *gather*,
 feels like a faint memory.

In addition to, Give Thanks, and Blessed and Gather,
 Hobby Lobby also has a lot of signs
 printed with scripture
 throughout their store.

Signs like, *You have filled my heart with joy*, Psalm 6:7
Signs like, *Where you go, I'll go, Where you stay, I'll stay*, Ruth 1:16
 And signs like, *As for me and my house,*
 we will serve the Lord, Joshua 24:15

I know that some décor like this
serves as good reminders to us;
 these verses and sayings are inspirational,
 A sign that reads, *Give thanks*, sounds a lot like,
 the first line of Psalm 138,
 "I give you thanks O Lord,
 with my whole heart."

But I've not come across any sign that reads,
 "I am worn out, O Lord; have pity on me!
 Give me strength; I am completely exhausted." -Psalm 6:2
 How about that on some nice throw pillows!

Hobby Lobby and other enterprising businesses
are making good money off what,
what might be more sentiment
than real affirmations of
ongoing faith.

But they don't have to be
just sentiment or décor -
if every time we hang a sign
we do so because we know deeper in our hearts
that it is a constant reminder
of our faith journey.

Remember that bit
from Jeff Foxworthy's comedy routine
where he would repeat the things, people say
- things that seemed silly, obvious
and he would say,
here's your sign?

Well, let's go all DIY
and let's help each other put up signs.
Let's do this like a home reno,
or design on dime budget
and let's figure where
Give Thanks, Blessed and Gather
should go on our homes and hearts.

Psalm 138 gives voice to a faith
that is living, honest and communal.
These words can show us
how the poems of our ancient faith
can guide us in the midst of crisis.
In this Psalm we see that we can be anxious
and doubtful
and faithful
all at the same time.

It begins with the affirmation that God is a God like no other:
¹I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart;
before the gods I sing your praise;

²I bow down toward your holy temple
and give thanks to your name
for your steadfast love and your faithfulness;
for you have exalted your name
and your word
above everything.

“Praising God with our whole heart
has an effect on our systems of loyalties.
When we praise the Lord with all we have,
other gods--those things
competing for our trust and veneration
--recede into the background
as the glory of God overwhelms them.”¹
When we praise God with our whole heart,
God’s glory overwhelms all lesser gods.
God’s glory overwhelms them.

Declaring that we give thanks to God
before all other gods,
means we are declaring an allegiance of sorts.
It means we are making
a shift - a turn - a rerouting
of priorities and focus.

To give God our whole heart in thanksgiving
-won’t be a one-time thing.
It will be journey, life-long,
that will eventually have a way
of reorienting our lives
toward an intimate knowledge
of God’s steadfast love and faithfulness.

This then is the affirmation of our collective faith.
So, hang the sign as a reminder.
Give thanks.
Maybe this sign hangs above your toothbrush,
A place where you will see it every day.

¹ Joel LeMon, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=640

Or maybe this needs to be a magnet on the front
of your refrigerator.
Give thanks, because in doing so,
you will reorient your life
toward God's goodness,
faithfulness and steadfastness.
You will see God's *chessed*,
at work in our crisis laden world.

Now what about Blessed?

This sign is difficult.

Because at first

we may want to put it everywhere.

All over the house,

the kid's bedroom.

The kitchen you just redid.

But here's the weird thing

about being blessed by God;

it often comes with hardship,

suffering and grief.

Anyone who has gone through the worst,

for the sake of God,

for the sake of truth,

will tell you that if you hold on to the end,

the suffering

always holds a blessing.

Remember Jacob?

³On the day I called, you answered me,

you increased my strength of soul.

⁴All the kings of the earth shall praise you,

O Lord, for they have heard the words of your mouth.

⁵They shall sing of the ways of the Lord,

for great is the glory of the Lord.

⁶For though the Lord is high,

he regards the lowly;

but the haughty he perceives from far away.

Be *blessed* people of God,
but not in the way you might think
-more like be blessed in the ways of Job,
who lost almost everything,
but saw the glory and immensity of God
and stood in silent, astonished awe
before it.

Job suffered greatly,
and though he was given tenfold what was lost,
I don't think that was Job's blessing.

His blessing was
that he was privy to God's own court,
he was given insight into the vast creative energy
that is the Divine.

His blessing came in staying true to himself and God
And seeing truth that his friends never will.

So, don't put this sign in your bathroom,
put that Blessed sign
where you lay down your head at night and cry;
Put your blessed sign near that chair
where you sit when you are anxious
Put that blessed sign
over your front door
because the people and animals
you love most are inside.

There is a house in our neighborhood
with a yard sign
that is always quoting scripture.
Once it said,
"I will punish the wicked for their iniquity."
I do not recommend
hanging that over your fireplace.

I think this sign is a much better option
“When you have more than you need
Build a bigger table, not a higher fence.”

You know what you can do at a bigger table?
Gather a lot of people.

The image scripture uses over and over
of how the kingdom of God looks
is the image of a feast.
A feast with enough for everyone.

Plenty of good things to eat and drink,
and like our communion liturgy affirms,
plenty of people from east and west
and north and south
so, there is a feast of relationships at this table.
They come together, they gather together
to be with one another
and the Lord.

One of the best gathering songs
I know is called, Crowded Table
by the group, The High Women.

If you don't know it,
I give you permission to pause the sermon
and search it on YouTube.
But I do want you to come back.

The chorus of the song is,
“I want a house
with a crowded table,
with a place by the fire for everyone,
so, let us take on the world
while we are young and able
and bring us back together
when the day is done.”

Gather.
Gather at a bigger table,
gather at a crowded table.

Gather around the fire
and be warmed;
gather back together
when the day's work is done.

Put that sign in your breakfast room
Put that sign in your kitchen island.
Put that sign on the table
where you light candles for fancy dinners.
Put it next to the sofa where you watch Disney+
Put that sign at your crowded table.

Gather.
Gather even when it can't be in person.
I know I've told you before
how one of my seminary professors
said that he belonged to a church
not because he was so faithful
but because when he didn't have
the strength to believe,
someone in his church family did
-they would believe for him.

When we gather our hearts and minds like that
-even if it can't be in person—
we are given the chance
to be the body of Christ with and for each other.
And in God's grace
we have faith for each other
when keep faith is hard.

So, we gather in spirit,
trusting that the God
who transcends time and place,
who is always at work in our lives
that God will not forget the work of his hands.

⁷Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies;

you stretch out your hand,
and your right hand delivers me.
⁸The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me;
your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever.
Do not forsake the work of your hands.

When we gather in many different places
but still worship the one we love and serve
...when we gather, we know
that some of us will be anxious and doubtful.

Some of us will be bedrock sure and certain.

And some of us will have camped
in the middle ground
somewhere in between
for a long time.
But here's the thing - when we gather,
we realize the table
has been built big enough for all of that.

Our psalm ends
with an honest and anxious plea
for the Lord to remember the work of his hands.
This psalm begins with heart-felt praise of thanksgiving.
This psalm assures us
that even in our suffering
God will be at work in our lives
and that is our blessing.

So, let's put up signs.
Let's *Give Thanks*;
Recognize the ways you are *Blessed*;
And let's anticipate that when we do get to really *Gather*
The glory of God will overwhelm us.

Benediction

Frederick Buechner says,
“Life is sometimes like the Hebrew alphabet:
it’s all consonants and no vowels.
All by itself, it’s all hard sounds
that are impossible to vocalize.
Of course, native Hebrew speakers/readers
know instinctively
which vowel sounds to supply
in between which consonants
to make the language speak-able and pronounceable.

And that is what faith does for all of us,
Buechner said:
it supplies the vowels that help our lives to make sense.
Into the jumble of consonants
that our lives throw at us,
we are given by grace
the vowels we need
to make of it all something lovely after all.”²

² Scott Hoezee https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-16a-2/?type=the_lectionary_psalms