



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
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Thanksgiving

November 28, 2013

“Giving Thanks for What You Do Not Have”

(1 Thess. 5:16)

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“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess. 5:16).

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, Your mercies are new every morning and You graciously provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant us Your Holy Spirit that we may acknowledge Your goodness, give thanks for Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience all our days; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Back in St. Louis, we had a neighbor by the name of Ed. Ed was a bus driver for the city of St. Louis. He had a great big smile, seemed always happy, and was one of those guys always outside and tinkering on something. When I went out to get the newspaper in the morning, or when I came back from church in the evening, more often than not Ed was the first person I'd encounter. And the exchange would always go like this: "How you doing, Ed?" Without fail or deviation, Ed would show that smile, exposing his gold tooth of which he was proud, and he would say, "I'm blessed." It could be five degrees or 105. Ed could have been up to his ankles in snow or his knees in leaves. He could be under his truck or on his roof. It didn't matter. The litany was always the same. "How you doing, Ed?" "I'm blessed."

Ed understands something important about Christian theology. He understands that God has given us everything. Life and salvation are not things we pay for. They come to us as gifts from God. And so the fundamental human response to God is gratitude. Gratitude is very close to what it means to be a Christian, and it is a lesson Ed reminded me of just about every day. "I'm blessed." And it's true – about him and about you and me. It is the most important fact about us. We have a God who created us and a God who redeemed us and a God who has made himself known to us, created relationship with us through Word and Sacrament. We have a God who is still taking care of us. We are truly blessed; and to know it and say it is a good way to start your day and live your life, regardless of whatever else is going on.

Paul writes, "Give thanks in all circumstances." Apparently in all circumstances you can still find something for which you can give thanks. Even when the weather is foul, the

Packers in a deep slump, the arthritis throbbing, the business failing, the future bleak . . . no matter your station or status, there are still things in all circumstances for which you can give thanks.

The psalmist writes, “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever” (Ps. 136). Even when life is not good, give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. The misery will not endure forever, but his steadfast love will endure forever.

In Colossians 3, under basic instructions for Christian living, Paul simply writes, “And be thankful.” (Period). He doesn’t bother mentioning for what we should be thankful. He just says, “Be thankful” (v. 15). That is, when you approach life with that attitude, you’ll find there’s always something for which to give thanks.

A few verses later Paul writes, “Whatever you do, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God through him” (v. 17). “Whatever you do . . .” whether under the truck or on the roof, at home, at work, at play, at rest . . . do it all giving thanks to God.

The Bible nags us about giving thanks because it’s good for us. Study after study shows it makes us happier and healthier. The Bible also nags us to give thanks, because, by nature, we’re not very good at it. Often we don’t feel grateful when we should.

That takes us to our Gospel lesson which appears in almost every Thanksgiving sermon. Jesus encounters a group of people suffering from leprosy. It was a terrible disease. Physically it was painful. Emotionally it was devastating to be isolated, quarantined from the rest of society. Spiritually it was terrifying, with the assumption basically being God was getting a head start on an eternal punishment to come.

From the prescribed distance, these men call out to the Lord, “Jesus, have mercy!” Jesus tells them to see the priest, whose job it is to certify that people who had leprosy were cured, or clean, and therefore fit for normal social contact again. On the way to find the priest, something happens. The leprosy clears up. By the time they arrive, it’s gone. They’re clean! The priest certifies it, and suddenly ten men as good as dead are given their lives back: their families, their homes, their hope in salvation.

This is a very happy, celebrative group of men, laughing, hugging, crying. One by one, each of them peels off and heads for home. Just one of the ten catches himself and turns to go back to Jesus. When he finds Jesus he falls on his face, thanking him.

Normally, when we think about giving thanks, we think of the stuff we have, first article stuff: “clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, spouse and children” and so on. But this man was giving thanks for what he did not have. He no longer had even a trace of leprosy, and so he gave thanks.

Giving thanks for what we do not have. Can you do that?

Like many of you, I’m not altogether pleased with the work of those in congress, regardless of their party affiliation. We have a contentious, dysfunctional congress that can hardly agree on anything . . . probably because they were elected by a contentious, dysfunctional population that can hardly agree on anything. If I wanted, I could let it ruin my days. Another alternative, however, is to decide to be grateful for what we do not have. We do not have a dictator. We do not live under anarchy. And though things are contentious, we do not live in a nation torn by civil war.

Giving thanks for what we do not have. On the lighter side, I’m also thankful that I don’t have lice in my hair nor a cat in my house. I have a knee that annoys me a lot, but I don’t have a wife that annoys me. What a gift . . . and I’m grateful.

I’m grateful that I don’t have an angry or difficult mother in law. Those mother-in-law jokes have never made sense to me. Mine is as sweet as pie. I give thanks for that.

I could go on all day, as you know. But now, it’s your turn. What is it that you’re grateful for that you do not have? What things realistically could you have, but you don’t, and for that you give thanks to God?

Giving thanks for what we do not have. There are some things that none of us have, and for that we can be grateful. None of us has, hopefully, the feeling that we’re just the product of chance, an accident, drifting randomly through space, ultimately heading towards death and black nothingness. Give thanks for that. Instead we have an almighty and omniscient

Creator who tenderly knit us together in our mother's womb. He says his eye is on the sparrow, so we know he's watching over us, and still preserves us. His creative work continues in the preservation of his creation.

None of us has a God who is indifferent to us. Give thanks for that! Instead we have a God who says in John 3 that he very much loves the world (Jn. 3:16). Do you live in this world? Therefore you know you are an object of God's holy love.

None of us, even the most fiendish among us, has a God who is longing to wipe us out. Instead we have a God who, quote, "takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live" (Ezek. 33:11). Paul wrote we have a God who "wants all people to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). There's great grace in that little word all, because it allows for no exceptions. He wants all to be saved, none to be lost. So not one of us can say we have a God who cares little about our salvation. None of us has a God who is apathetic toward us, even if we happen to be apathetic toward him. No, he loves you so much he traded in his death for yours.

None of us has, hopefully, the sneaking suspicion that God is tallying up all our sins and iniquities like a fussy accountant, carefully keeping track of each one of them in his log until the day when he can finally open up the books against us and give us the just reward for our deeds. If we did, we'd all be lost, for no one is saved by keeping the Law. No, we have a God who chooses to "remember our sins no more". We have a God whose blood "blots out our iniquities." We have a God who does not keep a record of sins in his log, but who does write our names down in the Lamb's Book of Life.

None of us, hopefully, has any doubt about what happens to us when we die. That's also something for which we can give great thanks that we do not have. Instead we have the promise: "he that believes and is baptized shall be saved." It's very simple, really. Are you baptized? Do you have a mustard seed of faith in Jesus as Savior? The promise is sure, because he keeps his promises. You can know with a certainty that when you die, you

are going to go to heaven, because it doesn't depend on you or your good works or your sin. It depends on God and the gifts of baptism and faith that he gives us.

Giving thanks for what we do not have. We could go on and on and on giving thanks for what we do not have. And maybe that's the point of the exercise. Each of us has something we would rather not have: credit card debt, arthritis, a cat, a mean spirited boss. However, there are infinite more possibilities of things we could have but don't.

Give thanks to God then, in all circumstances. Give thanks also, for what you do not have. Amen.

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