

True Thanks for True Blessings

In the name of the Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the beginning of God's creation, dear friends in Christ: Both from having heard a lot of Thanksgiving messages over the years, and from my own practical experience, I can tell you that there are two basic approaches to preaching for Thanksgiving. The first, and most common, is to attack the sin of ingratitude that indwells the hearts of each of us. It's a relatively easy target, especially in this country where we are so richly blessed in terms of material wealth. Even the poorest of our citizens enjoys a standard of living far above that of the working classes in most of the world. The truth is that most of us do not know what it means to be in need of life's basic necessities. And because it's part of our fallen nature to take for granted what we've never had to do without, ingratitude for what we do have inevitably results. It's only when we have to do without something for an extended period of time that we come to really appreciate it and learn to be thankful to God.

And we should be thankful—not because God needs to be thanked. He doesn't. It's his nature to give. He loves us and wants to fill our lives with the good things he created. The problem is that we tend to be more focused on the gifts than the giver. That's all that nine out of ten former lepers could see: that they were healed. They probably ran to the priests for their inspections so that they could resume the lives they'd lost because of their dread disease. But by focusing only on what they'd gained, they lost the opportunity to build a relationship with the Lord who gave them the gift. They forgot about Jesus. And this is the issue. As today's first lesson revealed, when you're so wrapped up in the gift rather than the giver, you tend to forget who it is that gave you everything. And before long you're giving yourself credit for accumulating all that you have. "My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth". And thus we make idols of ourselves. So, you see, it's not that God needs our gratitude. It's rather that we need to be thankful so that we don't lose God in our lives.

But anyway, that's one approach to Thanksgiving preaching: to convict everyone of ingratitude. The other is to uncover the sins of gluttony and selfishness that are so prevalent in our society – and in which we also often engage. That's an easy target on Thanksgiving too, because the chances are good that sometime after this evening's service (if you haven't done so already) most of us will gather in our comfortable homes with family and friends in order to feast—no, that's too soft a word – better to say *to over-indulge* ourselves with the traditional Thanksgiving fare. And then, after loosening belts and burping away some of the excess pressure, we'll lounge around the house, watching parades and football or playing family games, calling distant relatives on the phone ... perhaps sleeping off dinner by taking a nice long nap – whatever your idea of taking it easy and enjoying the good life is.

So the main thrust in this sort of sermon would be to point out how selfish all that is especially in light of the fact that so many in the world are hungry and without shelter and without basic necessities of life. Such a message would go something like this: "How can you sit there and stuff your face like that knowing that in some parts of the world that's more food on your plate than most families eat in an entire week? And can you really say that you've done your part? What more could you do to alleviate the problems of this world? You who have so very much, what could you sacrifice to share with those in need?"

These Thanksgiving messages, though a bit rarer than the first kind, are very effective. They make you feel so guilty about not sufficiently sharing your blessings that you can't properly enjoy your Thanksgiving dinner. They make you want to skimp on your servings, and tell the

person cutting the pie to make your slice just a bit smaller and to hold the whipped cream, because it helps ease your conscience – as if you were somehow sharing in the suffering of others by holding back. “I’ll forfeit my dollop of *Cool Whip* in sympathy for poor and needy.”

Now, either of these approaches would have been worthy of our consideration again this Thanksgiving, because we are still just as ungrateful and just as selfish as we were last year at this time. But this year I thought I’d break out of these well-worn ruts. Why? Well, one reason is that a few months back we were hit with a fairly violent storm that did a lot of damage to homes, to property, to livestock, and to crops in the field. My car is so dimpled with dents that if were white it could pass for a large golf ball. I know a lot of yours look the same. The point is that we all suffered loss – loss of material things and wealth. What we didn’t lose is what matters most. No one was killed or seriously injured, which is almost miraculous considering power of the storm and the extent of the damage. But the storm helped us to see things more clearly. It made us that much more grateful to God for the people we love, and for his hand of protection over them – protection that we know extends beyond this life. Even if someone had been killed, as painful as that would have been, we still would have had the comfort and joy of knowing that the person was alive with Christ and that we would see them again.

And this made me think of something else. It was a little over ten years ago that our nation was attacked by terrorists from Al Qaeda. Ever since we’ve been engaged in conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and in other places around the world – to include our own home turf as the Fort Hood shootings and several other failed plots within the US prove.

The upshot is that there are thousands of American families that will gather this extended holiday weekend to observe their Thanksgiving traditions, but they won’t feel much like celebrating and being thankful for their gourmet food, fine clothes, grand houses, and fancy cars. These things won’t seem very important at all. That’s because there will be an empty space at the table ... a place that belonged to someone very dear whose life was cut short by a violent act of war or terror. Or maybe it’s the place of a son, daughter, father, or mother who’s on a ship in the Persian Gulf, or living in a tent near a war zone, or maybe they’re flying hazardous missions over hostile territory. And the people at home are worried about them, so that when the family sits down to count their blessings, they would gladly trade almost all of them to have their loved ones safe at home.

And what I’m driving at here is that as wealthy and powerful a nation as we are, a nation so richly blessed by God in every material way, there is, almost straight across the board, a deep underlying poverty. The vast majority of the families I just mentioned have no relationship whatsoever with the Lord Jesus Christ. And because of that they are spiritually impoverished. Their lives have no foundation, no real meaning, and no real hope. They have nothing *but* material wealth. And now they are seeing how unsatisfying and ultimately meaningless all that is in light of the really big questions in life. Those without Christ who lost loved ones have only their pain and grief now. There’s no comfort for them. Those unbelievers with family overseas in harm’s way have only their anxiety and worry because they have no Lord in whom to trust and into whose care to commend their loved ones.

The situation in our country is a lot like the ship in which the prophet Jonah booked passage when he was running from the Lord. It was loaded with valuable trade goods and wealth. But when the ship ran into the storm, all that stuff was pretty useless. It all went overboard to lighten the ship. And it wasn’t enough; the ship was still in peril of sinking. In their desperation, the sailors cried out to their many different gods. And we actually saw some of that. In the aftermath of 9-11 many people who didn’t claim any god were going to massive

prayer gatherings to call upon all the gods in an attempt to cover the bases. They were looking for something to hang on to in the storm. They were looking for hope and a sense of security in a world that offers none. Most of them are still searching.

And meanwhile I wonder if we aren't a lot like lukewarm Jonah, sleeping down in the hold through the storm. He's not hot; not on fire for the Lord, willing to share the hope of salvation he has with those who need to hear it as he's been told. Nor is he completely cold: he does have his own weak and shaky relationship with the Lord. And he seems to think that's enough to get him by. But shaky, disobedient, lukewarm faith isn't what the Lord wants for him. And so it's going to take a very unpleasant few days in the belly of a whale to adjust his attitude. But then again, it's better to get spit out of the mouth of a whale than out the mouth of the Lord, which is why the Lord inflicts this hardship on Jonah. It's to rebuke him in love to make him a better, more faithful, more spiritually wealthy and generous man.

And that brings me to the message of Jesus to the church at Laodicea that we heard, which is so appropriate for us this evening. In it the Lord tells his people, "You think you're rich, but you're not." Just as unbelieving people are finding that material wealth isn't anything to hold on to in the storm, the Lord is telling us by these uncertain times that our spiritual portfolios aren't all that we thought they were. They're certainly nothing to retire on. That's why he advises us to do some investing.

He says, "Here I am with true blessings: gold refined in the fire" – a reference to his pure Word of truth. "I've got white garments for you to wear" – which is the righteousness that comes by faith when we believe his Word – the righteousness he earned for us by his perfect life and his death upon the cross. This is his righteousness that covers the shame and disgrace of our sin. He says, "I have salve to anoint your eyes" – which is the ability to discern things spiritually, to see the world around us and what happens in it from a point of view that understands that God's mighty hand is directing all things for our ultimate good.

These are true riches that the Lord wants you to have in abundance. He says, "I'm standing here at your door and knocking. If you hear me, open the door." He wants nothing more than to give you these blessings in greater measure than you have now. He wants to give you these true treasures that last forever. And if you think you've got enough already, that's one of the biggest proofs that you don't. Just as those who value material wealth above all things can never be satisfied with what they have, so those who truly value spiritual wealth are always looking for more. Complacency with your spiritual situation is what being lukewarm is all about. And a couple other indicators of spiritual poverty are the sins of ingratitude and selfishness. We're guilty here too. We take the blessings we have here in the church for granted, and we are selfish about sharing them with those in need. And now it looks like I have returned to traditional Thanksgiving themes after all.

Jesus says, "I stand at the door and knock." You are hearing him now. As you sit down to celebrate with your family and in all the days that follow, remember to open the door and let him in. When you do, he says, "I will come in and eat with you" – which is to enjoy full fellowship with him. And he promises to bring with him the true treasures of life and salvation for which we can be truly grateful and with which we can enrich those around us. Let's let him in and give him our thanks and praise now and forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gratia!