

Learning Gratitude

In the name of him who is the source and giver of all good things, dear friends in Christ: Tomorrow, of course, is our national day of Thanksgiving. Sadly, for many it has become simply “turkey day” – the beginning of a long weekend on which it’s customary to gather with family and eat extra large portions of iconic American dishes such as turkey meat that’s always dry so we futilely try to hydrate in either greasy gravy or overly sweet cranberry sauce, stuffing, mashed potatoes, yams (yuck) which according to time honored tradition have been topped with toasted miniature marshmallows (double yuck), Aunt Somebody’s super secret green bean casserole (which she discovered hiding in plain sight on the back of a can of Campbell’s cream of mushroom soup), pumpkin pie peeking out from under a small mountain of Cool Whip, and other seasonal delights and family favorites. Then, when everyone has eaten themselves into oblivion, they stagger into whatever room has the big screen television where they watch football, sleep it off, or some of both. This is important because it’s a key part of preparation for the next day’s assault on the stores that will open early with their “black Friday” sales and promotions.

My point being that there is very little in the way of *thanks* that goes on in most of our Thanksgiving observances. It’s more about overindulgence and consumerism. And its small wonder, for we as a people are spoiled. We live in the richest country the world has ever known. The description the Lord gives of the good land he’s giving his people Israel as their inheritance in the reading from Deuteronomy fits us our situation perfectly. We have more than most people can even imagine. Even the poorest of our poor have a higher standard of living than most of the population of the planet. And though we more than anyone have much to be thankful for, like nine of ten lepers we are more focused on the gifts than the Giver.

It’s part of our sinful condition. Gratitude does not come to us naturally. We have to learn it. Consider: as infants, all our needs were taken care of. Though we couldn’t begin to describe *what* we needed, we counted on someone else to recognize our needs for feeding, for sleep, for being cleaned up and clothed, for being cuddled and held. When something was out of sorts, all we could do was cry and demand that someone take care of it. As we grew older, it never occurred to us to be thankful for what our parents did for us. We expected it of them. It was only when third parties were involved that we were introduced to the idea of expressing gratitude. Our parents taught us “Now, when someone gives you something, you say ‘thank you.’” And none of us remembered to do it. We had to be prompted time and again, “Now, what do you say?” “Oh yeah. Thank you.” But even then, it was an obligation of being polite; not anything we actually felt from the heart.

And here’s the problem: gratitude is learned not by *having*, but by experiencing *want*. We learn to appreciate the value of things by *not* having them. The Israelites learned to be grateful for freedom because they had long suffered as slaves under severe taskmasters. They learned to be grateful for water because they knew the urgency of thirst. They learned to be grateful for the manna the Lord provided because first he caused them to know the emptiness of hunger. They learned to be grateful for solid homes in a good and fertile land because they spent 40 years living in tents in a desert wasteland.

The Lord told them as they went in to take possession of that land, “Remember what I’ve done for you. Don’t forget. Don’t begin to imagine that you acquired all these things by

yourselves with your own power and strength.” And to help them remember the Lord instituted the festival called Succoth, also known as the Feast of Booths. It was the annual holiday that most closely approximates our Thanksgiving, but it lasted for a whole week. Interestingly enough, though it was called a *feast* which might sound like sitting down to lots of rich food, exactly the opposite was true. The festival was about roughing it. People moved out of their houses into makeshift shelters. They camped out and ate simple meals. They slept on the hard ground. It was to remind them of the time they spent in the desert when they didn’t have it so good. They gave up the comforts of home in order to experience a bit of discomfort, so that they would appreciate that much more and learn to be grateful to the Lord for what they *did* have.

Our pilgrim forefathers who celebrated the first Thanksgiving in this land were grateful to the Lord because they spent that first year on this continent in dire need, living on the brink of starvation. Indeed, many of them did die of cold, disease, and other hardships.

None of us has ever known that kind of desperate need. And that’s why it’s so hard for us to be truly grateful for the things God has given us. But perhaps there’s a less painful way for us to learn gratitude. One of the gifts we been given is that of an imagination. We don’t have to physically experience something to understand at least to some degree what it would be like. So, join me in a little thought experiment. Consider this: what if the only things you had today were those you remembered to give thanks for yesterday? Where would that leave you?

Let’s start with the basics. Would you still have your health? How about your ability to reason or to remember? What about your vision, sense of smell and taste, the ability to hear, to talk, to read, to write, to stand up and walk around on your own two feet?

If you are married, would you still have your spouse? Your children? Your extended family and friends? What about your neighbors?

Would you have your home? Would it be equipped with electricity? Heating? Would it have running water that’s safe to drink and that comes out of the tap hot or cold at your command?

Would you have any clothes to wear? (That could be awkward.) Would you have shoes and socks to put on your feet? A coat to wear when it’s cold outside?

Would you have a vehicle to drive? Or safe roads to drive it on? How about a bank account? Any money at all, for that matter. Would you have a job or other source of income?

Would you enjoy the rights and protections of US citizenship? Would there be armed forces to protect the country? Police to maintain law and order? Fire and rescue workers to help when needed? Doctors and nurses to treat you when sick or injured?

I could go on, but I’m sure you get the point. If you only had what you remembered to be thankful for, I’m guessing that you wouldn’t have very much at all. For goodness sake, I wrote this message and I wouldn’t have very much. But imagine trying to get by without anything I mentioned, and you can begin to understand how grateful you should be to the Lord for providing it.

And thus far I’ve only asked you to consider material and temporal things. Consider how much more you should be grateful for the blessings you have that are spiritual and eternal. If

you only had today what you gave thanks for yesterday, would you have this church? Would you have the Gospel of Jesus Christ? I've found in my ministry that the people who are the most thankful for coming to a Lutheran understanding of the Christian faith are those who came into it after having been raised in some other religious system. For them the Gospel of Jesus Christ was something partially obscured in one way or another. The question of their salvation was always in doubt. There could be no certainty. They couldn't simply look to the cross of Christ and know for sure that all their sins were forgiven. It always depended to some extent on what they did or didn't do.

Try to imagine that: living in constant fear of an angry God who was never quite satisfied – like Luther himself before his rediscovery of the Gospel. He saw the Lord as a cruel taskmaster who was nice enough to provide a path to salvation through the Church, but then he made that path too difficult for anyone to climb. If you ran from the Lord, you were damned. But if you tried to move toward him and do things his way, you were still damned. Put yourself in that impossible situation, and then you'll see how sweet and comforting it would be to discover that in truth salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in the accomplished work of Christ in his death and resurrection.

Our Lord's goodness and generosity to us knows no bounds. For so great a salvation as he has provided in his Son, and for all the good gifts of his creation, may the Lord teach us to be truly grateful. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!