

“A Sacrifice of Thanksgiving”
Psalm 50; Romans 1:18-25; Luke 17:11-19

Introduction

This next week, most of us will gather with family and friends around tables loaded with turkey, stuffing, cranberry sauce, and the the trimmings that mark the annual celebration of Thanksgiving. Why do we observe this day in a world with so much terror and suffering, disease and hunger, where so many are brokenhearted and alone?

In November of 1620, the Mayflower dropped anchor off Cape Cod. Aboard ship was a hungry, disconsolate band of 150 pilgrims and crew who had spent six difficult weeks crossing the Atlantic, and now faced what Gov. William Bradford described as “a hideous and desolate wilderness full of wild beasts and wild men.” One year later, having lost over half their number to disease and exposure, rather than grieving their circumstances and cursing the God who – they believed – had called them to make the crossing, they invited ninety-one of those “wild men,” Native Americans who had become their friends and helpers, to join them for a feast of thanksgiving to God for keeping them safe through their first year in the New World.

From the perspective of our age, this is remarkable. In such primitive and dangerous surroundings, with no creature comforts, no stores or cities or hospitals, this band of survivors, who had lost over half of their companions, still took the time to stop and give thanks to God for his kindness in bringing them through another year. Yet we, with our houses and cars, our markets and entertainments, our hospitals and technologies that make basic living so easy, we who live in relative safety, find it hard to be deeply grateful, and tend as a culture to question why bad things happen, rather than asking why so many good things have been given to us simply by being born at this time, in this place. We think somehow that all of this is ours by right. We worry so much and thank God so little and so seldom.

Next Sunday marks the beginning of Advent season, the start of a new church year. I find it fitting that in our country, the final Sunday of the church year is always the week of our Thanksgiving celebration. It is the right way for Christians to end the year. *There is, perhaps, no virtue as conspicuous in its absence as gratitude.* Have you ever known anyone who expected everything and was grateful for nothing? Infants are often like that. They squeal to be fed and changed. When they learn to speak, no one needs to teach them to ask for things. But we must teach them over and again to say, “Thank you.” Some never learn.

As we prepare for the feast of Thanksgiving, let me give you three texts for meditation, three snapshots that show how crucial thanksgiving is to our relationship with God, and to our experiencing the grace and goodness that he offers us in Christ Jesus.

Body

1. Gratitude is a key that opens God's heart (Psalm 50:14&15,22&23).

The verses from Psalm 50 remind us that God finds ingratitude as distasteful as we do. To his people he says, "Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving ... and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me." But to the wicked he says, "Mark this, then, you who forget God, lest I tear you apart, and there be none to deliver! The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me; to one who orders his way rightly I will show the salvation of God!" In other words, when you are in trouble, thank God for his goodness to you, for the mercy he has shown you. Then call on him, and he will deliver you, and you will honor him.

Perhaps you have heard this over and over again, but it makes no sense to you. God seems to give a living and vibrant relationship to others, but not to you. You have tried reading the Scriptures, but they seem closed and irrelevant to you. You have tried praying, but no one seems to be listening. You come to worship services such as this one, but always seem out of sync with what is going on.

If this describes you, what is wrong? Why can't you seem to break through spiritually and connect? How can you prepare the way for God to show you his salvation? Perhaps what the Psalmist says here is the solution to your problem: "The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me; to one who orders his way rightly I will show the salvation of God!" It is gratitude that glorifies God and precedes the right ordering of our lives around the gospel.

2. The consequences of ingratitude are devastating (Romans 1:21-23).

We seldom connect ingratitude to the decline and collapse of cultures, but in his letter to Rome, Paul traces the very same stages of moral and cultural decline that we have observed in our own country over the last half century. We should be grieved at the description, but many of us are so steeped in the culture, so complicit in its decline through the entertainments that we pursue and the places where we invest our trust and confidence, that we have nearly lost our capacity to be scandalized.

Here is Paul's point: if the gospel is all about grace, then Christian living is all about gratitude. Where there is no sense of one's own sin, there is no recognition of the need of God's grace, and thus, no gratitude to God for his mercy towards us. Cruelty and selfishness, oppression and immorality, become the norm. Blessing will not follow for individuals or societies,

because blessing is rejected out of hand by those who think they have no need of God, and who fail to recognize that everything good that they experience is a gift from God.

3. The consequences of gratitude are glorious (Luke 17:11-19).

A person afflicted with leprosy in the ancient world, even if that person was a powerful king, was completely alienated from one's family and community, from its life and worship, cut off from healthy people and from God, only able to live among other lepers, utterly disenfranchised. So to be healed of one's leprosy was to be given back one's life, one's family and friends and community, and again to be restored to the worship of God's people.

Yet, only one of the ten healed lepers returned to give thanks, and he was of the despised race of Samaritans. Once again, the consequences of ingratitude proved devastating: Because of ingratitude, the healed and restored Jewish lepers, cultural insiders, became outsiders to God's saving grace. They were physically healed of their leprosy, but not of their sins. They got what they wanted from God, but not what they most needed.

But the consequences of gratitude were glorious: Because of gratitude, the Samaritan outsider came in from the cold, and got what the nine failed to receive: not only physical healing, but spiritual, forgiveness of sin, reconciliation to God, salvation, life, full humanity.

Gratitude, the willingness to give God praise and glory from the heart for his goodness and mercy towards us, was for Jesus the mark of true faith. Faith cannot be anything but grateful.

Conclusion

If we recognize God's goodness to us, how he has lavished his grace upon us and withheld no good thing needed for our salvation, giving even his dearly loved Son in our place, what should be our response? How should our gratitude overflow to our great God and King?

We who spend so much on ourselves would do well to give tangible expression of thanks to God in sacrifices of thanksgiving, of joyful worship and grateful obedience, of gifts of our time and of our wealth. This the Lord requires, but it should never be a legal debt discharged. Rather, it should be an expression of the debt of love we owe to him who loved us and gave himself for us.