

“THAT MY SOUL MAY PRAISE YOU”

a sermon on Psalm 30; Colossians 3:12-17; Matthew 25:14-30

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From the earliest days of civilization, we humans have offered up prayers of thanksgiving for successful hunts, plentiful harvests, recoveries from illnesses, and a host of other good fortunes. “Giving thanks” is truly one of the most ancient of all “religious acts.” Something deeply embedded in our being insists that we join in with the psalmists when they cry out, “Give thanks to the LORD, for He is Good!”

The 30th Psalm that I just read is a typical Thanksgiving psalm. Though we are not given the particulars, the writer says he has been “down to the pit.” Near death – whether physically, or just mentally. But God has now “brought him up,” and so now he proclaims “I will give thanks to you forever.”

We are also told in the *title* line, by the way, that this psalm was written (or at least, *used*) by the people of Israel “at the dedication of the temple.” Giving thanks is an act of *worship*, and it is very much at the *core* of who we are and what we do when we come together as a *community*. Because even in these days when we know so much about how life works, and when we can control so many things – cure so many diseases, heal so many wounds – still, there are times in all our lives, and in our life *together*, when we are aware and must admit that life itself is ultimately beyond our control: that the forces of nature are more powerful than we are, and that that life is a miracle, even if we do happen to understand something about the system of organs that makes it work, and even if we have accumulated a bit of knowledge about neurology, and psychology, and physiology.

And so on those occasions when we are aware of the gifts we have received – of life, of love, of abundance, of forgiveness, of healing, we give thanks.

The Scriptures, though, go a step further, and declare that people of faith ought to give thanks *regularly*, or as the Apostle Paul once put it, “*always* and for *everything* [give] thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father.” Always, and for everything – no matter *what* our circumstances, in other words, we should give thanks. That’s not easy, because we don’t *always* feel thankful. But you see, that’s exactly the point!

Rejoicing, giving thanks, praising God . . . those are *acts*. They might flow *out of* feelings. But they are not (in themselves) feelings. That is an important

distinction. Thanksgiving is an *act*. However, *engaging* in that acts, can help to *create* a feeling – by *reminding* us of times when God’s presence was undeniable, and by connecting us to the lives of those who are and have *felt* thankful.

Paul’s letters were very often written to people who had every reason *not* to be feeling thankful, and every reason to be and to feel depressed, or angry, or hurt, or scared. To “model” his own advice, Paul nearly always began his letters with words of thanks. On some occasions, it was clearly an easier task than at others.

When he wrote to the Christians in Philippi, for instance, to a group of believers who had stood by him in difficult times, and been his constant and faithful supporters, Paul wrote: “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, thankful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.” On that occasion, he clearly *felt* thankful, and his prayer was a fitting expression of his feelings.

In other letters, though, like the ones he wrote to the Christians in Corinth, the Apostle was much more reserved, more tempered by his concerns for the well-being of those folks, and at times by his disappointment at their lack of faith. And so in First Corinthians, it is for *God’s* faithfulness to His promises that Paul gives thanks, and in Second Corinthians, it is for God’s *mercy*, and *comfort*. Still words of thanks, but words offered from a very different set of circumstances, and different *feelings*.

Our reading from Paul’s letters this morning is from Colossians, which falls somewhere in between those more extreme examples. It seems that things had started out well in Colossae, but then some “false teachings” had started to creep into the church. Paul wrote the letter to set the record straight, and help to put them back on the right course.

“See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit,” he wrote, “according to *human* tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and *not* according to Christ.” And then a bit later, after reminding the Colossians of the mighty acts of God in Jesus Christ, he continued: “Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking . . .”

And in the case of the psalmist, for whom we don’t know the specifics of the predicament that led him to believe he was “in the pit,” we don’t know precisely what the false teachings in Colossae were. But they clearly had to do with teachings other than, and apart from, Paul’s proclamation to them. And they *seem* to focused on the introduction of popular Greek philosophical and spiritualistic ideas and practices – merging the Church’s proclamation with its “cultural setting.”

And Paul's advice to the Colossians was what we read as our lesson, "whatever you do, in word or deed, do *everything* in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

I think there are a couple of important points to be made about our common Christian calling to give thanks, in light of these readings. The first one is fairly self-evident. It is that no matter whether our "thanks" flow from how we feel at the moment or not, thanksgiving is a reflective art. It is looking back to times and events in which (with hindsight, at least) we discern God's presence. On Thanksgiving Day, we may be giving thanks "in the moment" – for family and friends, and the bountiful feast that is before us – but we will *also* be giving thanks for events that occurred hundreds of years ago, when our ancestors first came to these shores.

In our worship services, we regularly give thanks for events *thousands* of years old, and even much, much older. We give thanks to God in worship for *creating* the heavens and the earth.

With time and perspective, even events that seemed terrible when we were experiencing them can become worthy of thanksgiving. In his second letter to the Corinthian Church, Paul once vividly described a time when he and his company of travelers were in Asia: "We were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Why, we felt that we had received the sentence of death; but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead."

In the midst of trouble, Paul admits, he felt "utterly [and] unbearably crushed." But years later, looking back, he could finally praise God and give thanks, even for that time. And so it is for us. When we do "thankful reflection," we will discover meaning in events of our lives – all of them – and as a result of those discoveries, we will be strengthened and encouraged in our present circumstances.

To be sure, all of us have a great deal for which to be thankful, even in our present. And it is certainly good and appropriate for us to offer such thanks to God. But that might not always be the case. And even if it is, Paul's call to thanksgiving is a call to do more than just "name our blessings." It is a call to reflect on our lives as God's children, and to prepare our minds and hearts for His presence and His call to us to be ever more devoted, committed followers of His Son.

The second point is that in our increasingly secular society, where we *know* so much, and therefore often end up seeming to have less and less "room" or "need" for God, we need give thanks as a way of *reminding* ourselves – as the Colossians needed reminding – of the mighty acts of God in creating and

sustaining the world, and in sending Jesus Christ to live, and die, and be raised, “that we might have life, and have it abundantly.”

I love the holidays, and Thanksgiving at least as much as any of the others, because of how it brings families and friends together for a feast, at which we *eat* and *drink*, of course, but we don't *just* eat and drink. We share family stories. We remember past feasts, and with whom we shared them, and where. And *all* of that is what we need to put in the context of “giving thanks.” All of that *goodness*, and *bounty*, and *communion*, and *memory*. It is *all* from God, and it is all good.

The psalmist proclaimed the *reason* for giving thanks. He said it was “so that my soul may praise you (O Lord), and not be silent.” Giving thanks is “good for the soul.” It *enriches* our human experience to live in recognition that every good thing we have is a precious gift – not because we have earned or deserve it, but because *God is Good*, and we have been *blessed* with the opportunity to live, and be grateful.

May each and every one of you have a and blessed Thanksgiving, and may your celebrations be good for your souls.

To God be the glory.