

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
11/23/2011, Thanksgiving Eve
Deuteronomy 8:7-18, 2 Corinthians 9:6-15, Luke 17:11-19
Give Thanks Always

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Tomorrow is the happy holiday of Thanksgiving. For this Thanksgiving Eve sermon, my opening text is from our Second Lesson, from 1 Timothy Chapter 2. It is an exhortation to prayer and thanksgiving:

¹First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made *for everyone...* (1 Timothy 2:1, NRSV)

It is a verse very much in the spirit of the introductory line to the Proper Preface, which is part of the Great Thanksgiving in the Holy Communion service. That introductory line goes like this:

It is indeed right and salutary that we should *at all times and in all places* offer thanks and praise to you, O Lord, holy Father, through Christ our Lord;

And this line in turn is akin to a verse our Psalm Class looked at just this past Monday. It is from Psalm 147:

¹Praise ye the LORD: for it is good to sing praises unto our God; for it is pleasant; and praise is comely. (Psalm 147:1, KJV)

It is “comely” to praise the LORD. It is handsome. It is beautiful. It right and salutary. It just looks right for us human beings to give praise and thanksgiving to our Maker. Something is amiss in us if we do not do that, nor feel any inclination toward gratitude.

HALLELU

A few Sundays ago, on the 24th Sunday after Pentecost, our Immanuel Children’s Choir sang two fun prelude pieces. One of them was “Do Lord, oh do Lord, oh do remember me,” and the other was “Hallelu”:

Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelujah!
Praise ye the Lord!

It did our hearts much good to hear our little ones singing these songs.

When I got home that evening, I told my wife, Carol, that the children had sung “Hallelu.” Carol immediately began to sing it, sitting for one verse and springing up from the couch for the other as she sang, as you are supposed to do.

Our Immanuel Children’s Choir singing that song is a nice instance of that saying in the Bible about a little child:

...and a little child shall lead them. (Isaiah 11:6, KJV)

THINGS OUT OF CONTROL

Things sometimes look out of control, and then we might find it hard to praise the Lord. Sometimes things might seem chaotic and threatening, as in the first few verses of Psalm 69:

¹Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck.
²I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have
come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. ³I am
weary with my crying; my throat is parched. My eyes grow
dim with waiting for my God. (Psalm 69:1, RSV)

It would take a hard heart or a naïve one to say that such troubles never come the way of our human race. We need only think of folks who have lost so much in Hurricane Sandy, with waters rising up to their necks, to know that the times can become awful for folks.

But it is the way of our faith to know that things are *never* really out of control, but rather are in the good hands of our God. And sometimes we are privileged to see such faith at work: faith that perseveres in thanksgiving even when the times are tough.

CHRIS SCHULZE AND HIS MOTHER

Church Sexton Chris Schulze recently mentioned a scene with his mother, Margaret, very much like that. Margaret has been in our prayers recently as she has been struggling with an intense bout of leukemia. Praise God, she has been making good progress recently. But with Margaret, it is as if, progress or no, she means to praise the Lord.

And so the scene with Margaret I like so much to imagine goes like this: It was two a.m. in the hospital. It was the wee hours, and the nurses were gathering with smiles on their faces around the door to Margaret's room. Inside the room, Margaret had wanted to sing. So, she and Chris took up our hymnal—the old LBW like I have here—and began singing their way through the “Praise and Adoration” section of the hymnal. You've probably noticed that our hymns are grouped around themes. If you look at the top of each hymn, you will see the name of the group in which the hymn seems to fit most perfectly. An early hymn in the “Praise and Adoration” group is “Praise to the Father” (LBW 517)

Praise to the Father for his lovingkindness

Then, we have “Beautiful Savior” (LBW 518) and “All Creatures of Our God and King” (LBW 527), and “How Great Thou Art” (LBW 532) and “Now Thanks We All Our God” (LBW 533), and “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee” (LBW 551), and “When Morning Gilds the Skies” (LBW 545):

When morning gilds the skies,
My heart awaking cries,
May Jesus Christ be praised!

You know Chris Schulze has a good singing voice. So does Margaret. I can well imagine the nurses quietly gathering around for the beauty of the singing. But even more for the beauty of the faith!

SINGING VOICES OF A POORER SORT

It is proper for people of faith to praise the Lord. Even those with singing voices of a poorer sort should praise the Lord. Carol's father, for example, Rev. Carl Anderson, of blessed memory, had a voice that sometimes wandered from its proper key, yet he loved to sing out the great hymns of the church. He wanted to be found there in the midst of the earthly choir praising our Father who art in heaven.

For whether we have good singing voices or no, still you and I have good reason to “praise ye the Lord.”

In this evening's Gospel Lesson, Jesus speaks of the “birds of the air”:

²⁶Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? (Matthew 6:26, RSV)

Well, naturally they “neither sow nor reap.” They have wings and feathers, not hands and fingers for sowing the grain and harvesting the crop. So, by their very nature, they must forgo the farming that we humans rely upon. Yet they are not anxious about that. They tremble not, neither go to therapists. They simply take what food they can find in their world, and gladly eat it. The Lord opens his hand and satisfies them. And when we hear the songbirds singing, it is not wrong to think of them singing their gratitude to their Maker.

What the birds can do by nature—that is, live without anxiety and enjoy their daily bread whenever they get it—so we can do by training. We can learn not to be so anxious in life. Maybe we can even learn to live more simply and to spend ourselves more freely on behalf of others. And best of all, we can practice thanksgiving for the good things we do have. Literally, we can give thanks. We can fold our hands, even at the restaurant table, make the sign of the cross, and give thanks to God for many blessings.

Notice how Jesus refers to God in his great saying about divine knowledge of our needs:

³¹Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” ³²For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your *heavenly Father* knows that you need them all. ³³But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. (Matthew 6:31-33, RSV)

Jesus does not say, “God knows your needs.” Or “The omniscient One knows your needs.” He says something more tender. He says that our “heavenly Father” knows our needs.¹

Our God, who loved us enough to send his only begotten Son to die for us, is also the great Fashioner of our bodies. He understands quite thoroughly what we need. He supplies us with many good things now which we can recognize and for which we can give thanks. And he means to supply us with *everything!* For he means to bring us to heaven and all the adventures and abundance of that good place, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

¹ A lovely point made by Chrysostom in his homily on Matthew 6.