

"The Church's Thanksgiving!"

Psalm 136:1

The National Day of Thanksgiving

24 November Anno Domini 2004

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church of Emmett, Idaho

Pastor Michael L. McCoy

Grace, mercy and peace to you in the Name of the Father and of the ... Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Dearly Beloved,

We speak of thanksgiving, but we ought to speak of thanksgivings, for there are several. There is the "thanksgiving to someone," which is based on law. Then there is the "thanksgiving for some blessing," which arises from within a grateful nation. Amazingly, there is even a wicked thanksgiving, which is offensive to the LORD God and is an awful sin. Finally, there is the Church's Thanksgiving. This evening ponder each, and then receive even more of God's gifts that thanks may be given unto the LORD for His many blessings.

Our sermon text is Psalm 136:1 and our theme is ...

... "The Church's Thanksgiving!"

O give thanks unto the LORD; for He is good:
for His mercy endureth for ever.

Thus far the Word of the LORD our God.

First, ponder the thanksgiving which is based on law. This thanksgiving is of this world and our culture and society, and is really a practice of people doing things in response to a gift that has been given. We receive a gift and we have a need to get a "thank you" out to the giver of the gift. Such a "thank you" may be in the form of a note posted in the mail, or taking the time and making the effort to go to the person and say "thank you" in person, or picking up the telephone in order to just say "thank you." This really is expected and it is considered part of good manners. Some one gives you a gift and, as a result, you had better give thanks to that person. To fail to do this means that one is ungrateful; really not very thoughtful; indeed, is rather rude. Certainly we understand that this "thanksgiving to," which is of this world, is based on law and is not a bad practice.

Now, we do quickly realize that there could be situations where one is no longer able to give thanks to the gift giver, for he who gave is no longer around to give your thanks to. For example, all the members of the armed forces who died in the service of our nation and in the defense of our liberty. We are not able to thank such members of our military - from the unknown names of the long ago days of Valley Forge - to the uncle I never knew who was killed in the South Pacific in 1945 - to Lance Cpl. Phillip G. West, 19, of American Canyon, California who died last Friday as a result of hostile fire in the Al Anbar Province of Iraq.

We are not able to give them thanks for they are no more. So, what do we do? We remember and, in the midst of old wounds freshly opened in our hearts, we shed tears even as we give thanks for them and for their service and for their sacrifice. The family of Phillip West will, no doubt, have such feelings and thoughts every November 19th. One year follows another and suddenly Bob Hope is no longer here, to entertain the troops there, and so we head-hymn a subdued "thanks for the memories."

On a national level we remember fallen with flags at the gravesites and flowers at the Tomb of the Unknowns on Memorial Day. Proud patriotism arises within us at the singing of the "Star-Spangled Banner." Hushed attention waves over the standing crowds lining the parade routes of our nation's towns and cities as Old Glory passes by, with many assuming the position, either of the military salute, or the Pledge of Allegiance. This "thanksgiving for," like the previous "thanksgiving to," is right and appropriate whether spoken by Christian or non-Christian.

However, this can, and this too often does, naturally degenerate into a wicked thanksgiving that is nothing less than a First Commandment sin. Along with religious leaders who have an agenda, many well-intended but misled people, out of a sense of gratitude for abundant gifts, or to the memory of all those who died, or to this nation that grants such freedoms as we enjoy, begin to offer thanks to that rather hazy entity known simply as "god." The idea of "a god" or "the gods" fits right in with society's latest fashion, a practice that dates even from before the Tower of Babel, when the making of a god for oneself, or even of oneself, took place and the babbling was heard as one bowed down to a god of his own making and another to the god of choice. Dearly beloved, this is the civic religious thanksgiving of the world today, and even tonight.

This cacophony of the same sounds, all conjured in a spirit of giving thanks, is taking place at this very moment in Boise at the 22nd annual Thanksgiving Ecumenical and Interfaith Service. This syncretistic service began with the sounding of a Jewish shofar and will end with the honking on a Hindu conch shell. In between there will be a dozen others chirping to one god and bleating to another god as Muslims and so-called Christians "read from their scriptures and share their own messages of peace and thanksgiving." The invitation continues: "So go ahead, take a break from dinner prep and start the holiday season with prayer (no matter how or to whom you pray) and a choir of 100 voices, a brass ensemble and St. John's Cathedral's amazing pipe organ" (Idaho Statesman, Nov. 22, 2004).

Though taking place in a church building, that is not the Church congregated in the Name of the LORD and abiding in the Presence of Jehovah, the One True God. Therefore, even though there might be the mouthing of many words, even from the Bible, this is not the Church's Thanksgiving.

The true giving of thanks actually occurs where the LORD God is graciously present with His gifts of forgiveness, eternal life and salvation, all which only come through His means of grace; namely, through Word and Sacrament. The Church's Thanksgiving is summarized in the words ...

O give thanks unto the LORD; for He is good:
for His mercy endureth for ever.

The words sound familiar, don't they? This very verse is encouraged upon the faithful several times in the psalms. Most likely, it is familiar to us because we sing it nearly every week in the liturgy, right after The Nunc Dimittis and shortly before The Benediction. The Church's Thanksgiving is to

the LORD and not to some generic god or gods. Jehovah is the Giver of the gifts.

The Church speaks her Thanksgiving "unto" the LORD "for" the Gifts that Yahweh gave and gives. The Father gave His Only Begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him would have the gift of eternal life. The Son of God, born of Mary, gave His Blood to atone for the transgressions of the world and died to defeat death, all in order to give the gift of the forgiveness of sins. The Holy Spirit gave you the gift of repentance, that is, sorrow on account of your sins and faith in Jesus Who died and rose for you, all in order to give the gift of salvation. O give thanks unto the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost, for the gifts of eternal life, forgiveness and salvation.

All these gracious gifts come through Word and Sacrament. Christ was baptized in order that we could be baptized in His Name and call upon Him in the same Name in the Invocation. Christ spoke the Word of His forgiveness from the cross in order that you might hear the Word of Absolution from one of His pastors. Jesus gave us His Word that we might hear the Good News read by the called reader. The Incarnate Christ gave His Body and Blood in order for you to receive the same here in the Holy Communion.

After the Lord's Supper is given and received by the prepared faithful, the Church sings the words of Simeon, "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant, depart in peace, according to Thy Word." Then you hear the words of the Church's Thanksgiving. The first line is the invitation of the Word extended via the voice of the pastor who faces the congregation and graciously urges and invites, "O give thanks unto the LORD, for He is good." The faithful, with one voice, hymns the next line as an "amen," singing, "and His mercy endureth forever."

Then from the mouth of the minister, who now faces the altar, are the words:

"We 'give thanks' to Thee, Almighty God, that Thou hast refreshed us through this salutary gift; and we beseech Thee, that of Thy mercy, Thou wouldst strengthen us through the same in faith toward Thee and in fervent love toward one another; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end."

And the Church, with one voice, hymns the Church's Thanksgiving, singing her "amen."

All other thanksgivings will pass away for they are either to man because of the laws and customs of man, or they are for the men or the things of this world, or they are of sin, which will be no more after eternity begins. The Church's Thanksgiving is sung in this world and continues on in heaven itself for ever.

O give thanks unto the LORD; for He is good:
for His mercy endureth for ever. Amen.