

22 November 2006
Eve of National Thanksgiving

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Forgive Us, Lord, and Teach Us Thankfulness”

Text: Deuteronomy 8:1-10; Luke 17:11-19; 1 Timothy 2:1-4

[Note: This sermon uses the hymn Lutheran Worship #401, *Forgive Us, Lord, for Shallow Thankfulness*, as well as the assigned readings, to help us reflect on our giving of thanks, our lack of thanks, and our need for God to teach us “to receive our daily bread with thanksgiving.”]

LW #401 verses 1-2 sung.

Shallow. You probably know people you would consider shallow, or superficial. People concerned only with the here and now, with the present, with things that can be seen and had. People we tend to look down on. It’s not a flattering term, and so not a word we usually apply to ourselves. . . . But in the hymn you just sang, you did. *Forgive us, Lord – forgive ME, Lord – for shallow thankfulness.* And it’s true, isn’t it? We’re thankful for the gifts but not the challenges; for the ease but not the struggle; for the feast but not the fast. *Count your blessings*, is how we put it. The shibboleth of the shallow. Forgive us, Lord.

Because the truth is our blessings are too many to count. And maybe our greatest blessings are the things in our lives that we do not even consider blessings, or the things [as we sung] of which we’re unaware. That is why St. Paul tells us to give thanks for *all* things. (1 Thess 5:18) For *everything* that comes from the hand of our good and gracious Father is something for which to give thanks (Rom 8:28). Even as we heard in Deuteronomy (ch. 8), the time Israel spent in the wilderness. The blessing wasn’t only the Promised Land, but also what their Father was teaching them in the struggle. Strengthening their faith. And which was the greater gift?

This kind of thankfulness we need to be taught. It does not come naturally. It even goes against reason and common sense. But in Christ, even the wildernesses and struggles have purpose. Even our enemies give us opportunities for doing good. And give our life meaning and purpose. That God not only gives good to us, but uses us to give good to others. Shallow thankfulness seeks to avoid that, and chase after only what feels good, what can be seen as good, or what seems good to me. No, that will not do. *Forgive us, Lord, for shallow thankfulness.* And teach us true thankfulness, for all your works, for all your ways, for all your work in my life.

LW #401 verses 3-4 sung.

Selfish. There's another word we usually don't apply to ourselves! But we did it again, and yes, it's true. It's true, first and foremost, because we are sinners, and *every* sin is an act of selfishness. Doing what I want, not what God wants. For me, not for others. Not for service, but for gain. And then, what of others? As we sang: *a broken brother's needs?* Can a truly thankful person be selfish? Or if we see all that we have as gifts from our Father, can we not also want to give as well? And then that powerful line that we sang: *assured that only what's withheld is lost.* Or in other words, the tighter we hang onto the things of this world, the less *we* possess *them*, and the more *they* possess *us*. Or as Christ said: ***Whoever would save his life will lose it.*** (Mt 16:25)

Yet in all this we see not only many reasons to repent, **we also here see Christ.** For He is the One who withheld nothing. Who came to us who were leprous with sin (Lk 17); we, *His* broken brothers. Who did not just stumble upon us, accidentally, but who came to us purposefully. Who came to give to us. To give His life for us. To take our sin and give us forgiveness. To wash us in baptism, and to feed us with His body and blood. To give the dying life, the diseased cleansing, and the condemned salvation. The cost was enormous. But the cost of withholding even greater.

Can our right hand take such blessings, and our left hand fail to give the same?

Teach us, O Lord, true thankfulness – divine thankfulness. Yes, but He does more than teach it – He gives it. Giving us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace, transformed by His forgiveness, we are re-created into His image (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 5:17). For this *is* divine thankfulness – to receive the gifts of our Saviour, and then to give them. For that is to live His image. Passing on not sin, but forgiveness; not death, but life; not selfishness, but love. Not counting the cost, but knowing that we could never ever possibly give more than we have already received. For what we have received is sonship and eternal life in a kingdom that shall never end!

Forgive us, Lord, and work in us this thankfulness. Giving to us in grace, that we receive by faith, and then give to our neighbor in love. And so receiving our daily bread with divine thanksgiving.

LW #401 verses 5-6 sung.

Walls and wars that hide your mercy vast. Hide, yes. Stop, *no!* And perhaps this is the greatest blessing of all – that the things of this world do not, and cannot stop, the work of our Saviour for us. Which is good, for how good we are at *walls and wars!* Dividing and separating ourselves from each other. Fighting and quarrels, disagreements and anger. And not just between countries, but between neighbors, families, and friends. And so St. Paul urges young Timothy – and us – to ***supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings for all people.*** For all – high and low, powerful and weak, near and far. They need our prayers, and we need them.

Yes, we need them. It is not good for man to be alone. (Gen 2:18) For through governments, friends, neighbors, family, God is blessing us; using these people as His means, His masks, to do us good. To provide for us, protect us, and care for us. And most of all, to work in us and strengthen us in faith. Through troubles and pain, driving us to Him for help. In joys, turning us to Him in thanks. In confusion and fear, forcing us to Him for wisdom and guidance. In want, pushing us to rely on His provision. But through it all, drawing us to Him and His Word. To trust in Him. To believe *Him*, and in Him.

And to open our eyes, that His goodness and love not remain hidden, but be known. For as we learn from the Small Catechism: *God gives daily bread to everyone without our prayer, even to all evil people; but we pray in this petition that He would lead us to realize this* – that He would open our eyes! – that we may *receive our daily bread with thanksgiving.* (Explanation to Fourth Petition) ***For God wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*** The truth that we have a loving, heavenly Father. The truth of the Son who came to die for us. The truth of the Spirit, who comes to us now with faith and forgiveness, making us children of God. The truth of a Triune God who gives such gifts to men.

And so truly, we have much to be thankful for. Not only this day, but everyday. In our lives, in our church, in our world. And in our God and Saviour, who gives to us so abundantly, so consistently, so perfectly. All things. Forgive us, Lord, and teach us true thankfulness.

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

Rise and sing the Creedal Hymn LW #212