

**Sermon Notes for 11/24/15 (Thanksgiving observed, CLS Association Churches sponsor)**

**Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN**

**Text: Readings**

**Theme: PEOPLE OF FAITH ARE THANKFUL PEOPLE**

**The Point:** Over against the distressed and complaining cries of His people, our Lord acts mercifully in order to draw thanksgiving from our renewed hearts.

**Introduction:** Our theme this evening is this: PEOPLE OF FAITH ARE THANKFUL PEOPLE. But how can I say this? You know your own heart and your own tongue all too well – and I am not some head-in-the-sand, Pollyanna-like clergyman who claims to see things that are not really there. Can we say that people of faith really are thankful?

Warren Wiersby in his commentary on Colossians related a story about the prevalence of thanklessness. He told about a ministerial student in Evanston, Illinois, who was part of a life-saving squad. In 1860, a ship went aground on the shore of Lake Michigan near Evanston, and Edward Spencer waded again and again into the frigid waters to rescue 17 passengers. In the process, his health was permanently damaged. Some years later at his funeral, it was noted that not one of the people he rescued ever thanked him. (*Our Daily Bread*, February 20, 1994) Well, of course, maybe none of the people Edward rescued were Christian folks – you think?

Are people of faith really thankful? Well, we certainly cannot make that claim as an absolute thing. Thanksgiving does not always flow easily and consistently, even from the hearts and lips of those who love and serve the Lord Jesus. Listen to the way the psalmist describes some of his neighbors and colleagues: “Some sat in darkness and in gloom, prisoners in misery and in irons, for they had rebelled against the words of God, and spurned the counsel of the Most High. Their hearts were bowed down with hard labor; they fell down, with no one to help.” Trouble intervenes in our lives and disturbs our peace. Grief cuts us to the quick, and setbacks are all too common. Sometimes it happens, as the psalmist says, because we rebel against the Lord and His Word. That we have experienced personally, haven’t we?

I know all too well my own heart and my own readiness to jump into complaining if things don’t go my way. Two Sundays ago I quoted one of our poets and playwrights. George Bernard Shaw wrote about man as “a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.” That was a painful thing to mention, since it describes my own treacherous heart so well. I want the world to devote itself to making me happy, and when it does not, I complain. Is that a problem for you also? My own complaining, peevish, irritable spirit may be the cause of much of the trouble that I experience, since it goes so directly against the Lord’s will for my life. Rebellion against God leads to all sorts of troubles.

But at other times the pain and trial comes even to the faithful, to those who are struggling to be true to the Lord’s calling in their lives. I do not know why my mother and father had to go through the burial of two of their four sons before they departed this earth for heaven. I do know that they found reassurance in the words read at my brother Luther’s funeral over 50 years ago: “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” We were able to give thanks even in the day of grief and mourning that the Lord was in perfect control of Luther’s future. Many of you can relate exactly to what I am speaking about here.

We also need to be careful of saying that people of faith are constantly thankful people as a descriptive that always applies, so that if anyone ever complains or evidence an ungrateful spirit, we label them as outside the grace of God and the body of Christ. That would be a grievous misuse of this sort of statement.

But by God's grace, we can say that people of faith are thankful people. While it may not be the only descriptive phrase that applies to us, it does apply. You are here this night as affirmation of this truth. You are not here because you were dragged here – well, maybe a few of you young ones might feel that way, huh? But by and large, this group has gathered here today because we are thankful – not constantly, not uninterruptedly, not without ceasing – but we are thankful because we have a great and gracious and merciful Lord. We realize that whatever good we receive in our lives is due to His merciful action. We realize that by His grace we have been spared the horrors and terrors that so many have experienced. We do not deserve to live more than the 129 people who died in Paris at the hands of terrorists a little over a week ago. We are not more worthy of having peaceful lives than the Syrian people who have been displaced because of war in their nation. We are not more deserving of bountiful tables this Thanksgiving than the many millions around the globe who suffer hunger and malnutrition.

We are thankful because, despite whatever troubles we may be facing, we have the assurance that God is working all of that for our good and for His glory. Part of the psalmody read earlier says: “The Lord is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts; so I am helped, and my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to him.” God proves Himself faithful, even when my heart is treacherous. His faithfulness causes my heart to trust in Him, because He is not some curmudgeonly killjoy, just looking for ways to knock us around and keep us off balance. Many people view God just that way, though – and their lives end up being pretty miserable as a result.

When the Lord helps, then my heart exults, and that joyful heart bursts forth in song. “With my song I give thanks to him.” Singing is one of the most freeing and expressive experiences that we can have. When our hearts are bursting with thanks, singing is a natural and full-hearted way to express that thanks. The children are showing us that tonight. What a marvelous demonstration of thanksgiving they are providing for us!

It may be that the group of thankful people is a small and feeble group. After all, Jesus healed the ten lepers, and how many of them returned to give God thanks? Right, one, only one – and that one was the foreigner in the group. Jesus, who had told the parable of the Good Samaritan, experienced in this dramatic episode the reality that the only one rejoicing before Him was a Thankful Samaritan.

Why did only one cleansed leper return to thank Jesus? The following are nine suggested reasons why the nine might not have returned:

One waited to see if the cure was real.

One waited to see if it would last.

One said he would see Jesus later.

One decided that he had never had leprosy after all.

One said he would have gotten well anyway.

One gave the glory to the priests.

One said, “O, well, Jesus didn't really do anything.”

One said, “Any rabbi could have done it.”

One said, “I was already much improved.” (Charles L. Brown, *Content The Newsletter*, June, 1990, p. 3)

Obviously, a lot of things can get in the way of living thankfully! And what does Jesus tell this lone wolf Samaritan who returns to Him? “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” The other nine did not get to hear that rich, blessed commendation from Jesus. He had healed them, no question about that. But He could not assure them “your faith has made you well.” Only the thankful Samaritan heard that marvelous blessing from the Savior's own gracious lips.

Even if the group of thankful people remains an insignificant remnant on earth, yet that group has an important role to play in serving as salt and light to our communities. Paul in his Second Letter to the Corinthians encourages them in their generous support of a special offering for the saints in Jerusalem. We read these words a few minutes ago: “He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us.” In other words, people who live thankfully end up producing other people who see the excitement and joy of that sort of thankful living, and they are led to give thanks to God as well. So this giving of thanks is a contagion that we ought to be overjoyed to pass on to others.

Paul Harvey told this story about a military hero. Gratitude prompted an old man to visit a broken pier on the eastern seacoast of Florida. Every Friday night, until his death in 1973, he would return, walking slowly and slightly stooped with a large bucket of shrimp. The sea gulls would flock to this old man, and he would feed them from his bucket. Many years before, in October, 1942, Captain Eddie Rickenbacker was on a mission in a B-17 to deliver an important message to General Douglas MacArthur in New Guinea. But somewhere over the South Pacific the Flying Fortress became lost beyond the reach of radio. Fuel ran dangerously low, so the men ditched their plane in the ocean. For nearly a month Captain Eddie and his companions would fight the water, and the weather, and the scorching sun. They spent many sleepless nights recoiling as giant sharks rammed their rafts. But of all their enemies at sea, one proved most formidable: starvation. Eight days out, their rations were long gone or destroyed by the salt water. It would take a miracle to sustain them. And a miracle occurred. In Captain Eddie's own words, “Cherry,” that was the B- 17 pilot, Captain William Cherry, “read the service that afternoon, and we finished with a prayer for deliverance and a hymn of praise. There was some talk, but it tapered off in the oppressive heat. With my hat pulled down over my eyes to keep out some of the glare, I dozed off.”

Now this is still Captain Rickenbacker talking. He says, “Something landed on my head. I knew that it was a sea gull. I don't know how I knew, I just knew. Everyone else knew too. No one said a word, but peering out from under my hat brim without moving my head, I could see the expression on their faces. They were staring at that gull. The gull meant food...if I could catch it.” And the rest, as they say, is history. Captain Eddie caught the gull. Its flesh was eaten. Its intestines were used for bait to catch fish. The survivors were sustained and their hopes renewed because a lone sea gull, uncharacteristically hundreds of miles from land, offered itself as a sacrifice. You know that Captain Eddie made it. And now you also know that he never forgot. He lived thankfully. Because every Friday evening, about sunset on a lonely stretch along the eastern Florida seacoast, you could see an old man walking, white-haired, bushy-eyebrowed, slightly bent. His bucket filled with shrimp was to feed the gulls...to remember that one which, on a day long past, gave itself without a struggle...like manna in the wilderness. (Paul Auranndt, "The Old Man and the Gulls", *Paul Harvey's The Rest of the Story*, 1977, quoted in *Heaven Bound Living*, Knofel Stanton, Standard, 1989, p. 79-80)

**Conclusion:** Whether or not we have identified them as such, God's miracles continue to sustain us day by day. Is it anything less than miraculous that our grocery stores are stocked with all the things you need to have that Thanksgiving feast in a couple of days? Is it anything less than miraculous that your homes are kept warm when the cold is about – and cool when the temperature is hot outside? Is it anything less than miraculous that you are able to hear and understand the speech of a pastor pointing you to the Good News that God loves you and in Jesus Christ has forgiven you so that you might live thankful lives? Is it anything less than miraculous that, over against the distressed and complaining cries of His people, our Lord acts mercifully in order to draw thanksgiving from our renewed hearts day after day until we are called to our eternal home where thanks and praise will never go out of style?! In the name of Jesus, AMEN!