

“A Tentative Thanksgiving” Psalm 136

November 22, 2012

Thanksgiving Day

There it was on the church’s bulletin board as plain as day. When I read it, I was shocked. It very clearly said, “A Tentative Thanksgiving”. What? The word *tentative* means “unsure” or “provisional.” What could there possibly be about our national day of Thanksgiving that is unsure or provisional? Then I read the last word in the line: menu. This was a tentative menu on which people would sign up to bring things for our Thanksgiving Day feast which we will soon enjoy after our worship service today. There was nothing tentative about the day.

Then I thought again: maybe this day *is* tentative because our giving of thanks to the Lord (which this day is all about) is so tentative. It certainly is uncertain. Many are so busy enjoying the blessings for which they are to give thanks that they have no time to stop and actually give thanks. Others, like the nine lepers in our Gospel reading for today, are so excited about how God has blessed them that they simply forget to give thanks.

Our giving of thanks is also tentative because it is often so provisional. Especially on this day, we stop and take an inventory of all the good things with which God has blessed us. If we can see a sufficient number of tangible blessings, then we will give thanks. However, on the other hand, if there are no blessings or, at least, not enough blessings to satisfy us, we may not give thanks because we think it’s not warranted. We may spend more time coveting the things which we don’t have instead of thanking God for the things we do have.

None of this should really surprise us. We are, by nature, unthankful individuals. From an early age, did your children frequently and naturally give thanks or did you have to prompt them whenever they received something by telling them, “Now what do you say?” Such promptings often resulted in a very forced, “Thank you!”

We are unthankful by nature because we are sinful by nature. Our inborn sin makes us self-centered in our attitudes. We not only think primarily of what we want and need, but we get the

impression that we deserve to get what we want and need. Advertisers play on this narcissistic attitude with many ads that push their products by saying, "You deserve it."

Our inborn sin also encourages us to focus almost exclusively on material blessings. When we "count our blessings", they are usually things we can see and touch and which have a dollar value attached to them.

Because of our self-centered attitude we develop the attitude that we don't need to give thanks, but only complain. Because of our materialistic attitude, we may become blind to the best blessings which God has to offer us.

What's the solution? Many seem to think that the reason people aren't thankful is because they don't have enough for which to give thanks. Therefore, the answer to the problem is to get more stuff. However, if the problem of thankfulness is because of sin, then the only answer to reinvigorate our thankfulness is the removal of sin. Unfortunately, that is something none of us has the will or the power to do.

But God has both the will and the power to do so and they are encompassed in, what our text for today, calls "His steadfast love." The Hebrew word used here is so difficult to translate because it involves so many things that the word "love" in English seems so inadequate to translate it. It is God's love for you and me which does not come about because we are in any way worthy or deserving of it. It is a love that is not earned, but directed toward us by grace. God chose you for no other reason than to love you.

This love, unlike much of the love we give or receive, is not based on feeling. It is a love for you based on a commitment. Therefore, it is a steadfast love which will never change and only wants the best for you. God loves you, no matter how often you have sinned against Him or how bad the circumstances are around you.

This love which God has for you is not love 'in theory'. It is not a love in word only. It is love shown in action. God not only took pity on you and me in our sin but took action to do something about it. He sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, to take our sin and the punishment which our sin

deserved, upon Himself. As the old hymn puts it, “What wondrous love is this, O my soul,....that caused the Lord of bliss to bear the dreadful curse for my soul.” He bore the curse of suffering, the curse of death, and even the curse of hell so that you might be blessed with a multitude of blessings; that you might be blessed with life; and that you would even be blessed with heaven itself.

Therefore, this is not a temporary love or a fickle love like so much of what passes for love in our world today. God’s love is a love that lasts forever. Jesus was raised from death to life, nevermore to die. The love that raised Jesus from the dead to live forever is this same love which will raise us from our graves to a life that never ends. Nothing can or will change that. This is truly a steadfast love which endures forever.

You probably noticed a pattern in our responsive reading of the psalm this morning for God’s people to attribute every blessing to His steadfast love [which] endures forever. We give thanks to the Lord because He is good. He is the God of gods and the Lord of lords. And His love endures forever.

God made the heavens. He spread out the earth above the waters. He made the great lights – the sun, the moon, and the stars. All that we see, all that we have, and all that we experience happen because His steadfast love endures forever.

As God rescued Israel out of bondage in Egypt, saved them through the waters of the Red Sea, defeated Pharaoh and his armies in that same sea, and led people through the wilderness, so He has rescued us out of the bondage of sin, saved us through the waters of Holy Baptism, defeated sin, death, and Satan in those same baptismal waters, and is leading us through the wilderness of this life. And all of this is ours because His steadfast love endures forever.

As God protected Israel during their wandering in the wilderness, struck down great kings who opposed them, and gave them the Promised Land as their heritage, so He is leading us through the dreary struggles of this wilderness called earth, protecting us from great dangers, and will, for sure, give us the Promised Land called heaven as our eternal heritage. Why? His steadfast love endures forever.

As God gave food and all the necessities of life, not only to Israel, but to all flesh, so also He continues to bless us and all people with food and the necessities of life. We earn nothing. We deserve nothing. Everything we have is a blessing. As Dr. Luther put it in his explanation to the 1st article of the Apostles' Creed, God did this "out of fatherly divine goodness and mercy without any merit or worthiness in me." In other words, all that we have in every day life, all that we enjoy today in our feast, everything in our lives continues there because His steadfast love endures forever.

But His steadfast love which endures forever is not only a reason to give thanks in good times. It is also the basis for hope in bad times. The refrain for every blessing we receive mentioned in the Psalm can also be the refrain for every suffering that we experience in life. This is not to minimize suffering or ignore its reality. It is to acknowledge that these sufferings cannot defeat us and will not endure.

A "psalm" like that might go something like this. I am afraid and lonely. My enemies hate me and my friends have forgotten me, and my family is far from me. "Give thanks to the God of heaven, for His steadfast love endures forever." I am poor. I am lacking in the things I need for this life. I have no job and not enough money. "Give thanks to the God of heaven, for His steadfast love endures forever." I am in physical pain. I am sick and suffering. I have cancer. I grow old and feel my body deteriorate. "Give thanks to the God of heaven, for His steadfast love endures forever." My loved one has died unexpectedly. My loved one died after suffering greatly. I am dying. "Give thanks to the God of heaven, for His steadfast love endures forever."

God's steadfast love which endures forever is ultimately the only thing that really matters. If we did not have it, having all the wealth of the world wouldn't matter. As Jesus said, "What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" (Matt. 16:26) If we *do* have it, no problems can ultimately overcome us or tear us away from that love. As St. Paul wrote, "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Rom. 8:38-39)

My dearly beloved and blessed brothers and sisters in Christ, there is nothing ever tentative about the love of God. It endures forever. Let there never be anything tentative in our thanks for that love. "Give thanks to the God of heaven, for His steadfast love endures forever." Amen.