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Thanksgiving Eve
November 25, 2015
Text: Catechism's Explanation to the 4th Petition

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In some ways, I find the Thanksgiving holiday to be a tricky sort of thing; at least, culturally speaking. My question is not so much whether or not people, in general, are thankful, they may or may not be – I hope they are, but rather *to whom* are they giving thanks and *for what* do they give thanks. Those are the two questions we'll consider tonight. *To whom* do we give thanks and *for what* do we give thanks.

In decades past, it could be taken for granted that whenever people in our country gave thanks to God, they were thanking the Trinitarian God revealed in the Bible. That kind of cultural assumption is no longer valid. But that should not trouble us. The Lord Jesus always taught His disciples that true faith and piety can be found within His Church where His Word and Sacraments are rightly given and received.

In other words, we don't need a presidential holiday or a supportive culture in order for us to be a thankful people. We are thankful because we know who God is. He's the Father who sent His Son, Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit to save the world from the eternal ravages of sin and death. We are a thankful people because we know and have experienced that divine love revealed through the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are a thankful people because we know that our God has redeemed us to be His own dear children.

Martin Luther teaches us in the Small Catechism about God's gift giving nature and how we ought to respond. You might turn back in your hymnals, p. 324, and find the 4th petition of the Lord's Prayer. The 4th Petition is "Give us this day our daily bread." Luther then asks his famous question, "What does this mean?" Answer:

God certainly gives daily bread to everyone without our prayers, even to all evil people, but we pray in this petition that God would lead us to realize this and to receive our daily bread with thanksgiving.

Isn't that an amazing description of God?! This God that we worship and adore gives daily bread to everyone whether or not we pray, whether or not they are believers or

the worst kind of evil people. In other words, God gives because it's His nature and character to give. We don't earn God's blessings, not by our prayers or our good deeds or anything else. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit gives because He delights in giving His good gifts, freely without any strings attached. He gives because He loves. And for Him and to Him, we give thanks, tonight, tomorrow, next year, for all eternity.

Not convinced? That God gives to everyone generously out of love regardless of whether or not they are believers, whether or not they are good or evil? Psalm 145:15–16 beautifully describes God's universal gift-giving nature:

¹⁵The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. ¹⁶You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing.

And the Lord Jesus Himself says (Matt 5:45), “He (i.e., God the Father) makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” We give thanks tonight and at all times because God is universally and unequivocally good. “O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good” (Psalm 107:1) we say in our Sunday liturgy. Man's evil does not and cannot cancel or negate the giving and loving nature of God. Thanks be to God!

Luther teaches us that we pray the 4th Petition of the Lord's Prayer for the express purpose of realizing that God gives His gifts freely and graciously. Having thus realized this gracious nature of God, we receive what God gives with thanksgiving. It's really the only proper response. Thank you. Pure and simple. Thank you.

Well, that answers the *to whom* question. We give thanks to God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for this God gives and gives and gives generously whether we realize it or not. May our thankfulness grow richer as we grow in our knowledge and love of God.

Now we must consider the *for what* question. Luther helps us here as well in his explanation to the 4th petition of the Lord's Prayer. He asks the question, “What is meant by daily bread?” (p. 324) Answer:

Daily bread includes everything that has to do with the support and needs of the body, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, land, animals, money, goods, a devout husband or wife, devout children, devout workers, devout and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, self-control, good reputation, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.

It always seems to me that Luther got lost in the joy of enumerating all the blessings for which we give thanks. We're kind of used to giving thanks for our food and drink. We pray before every meal, after all. We're probably used to giving thanks for our money, at least, I hope we are. We're used to giving thanks for our family. We celebrate birthdays, wedding anniversaries, and so forth. I especially find delight in teaching 4th and 5th grade catechism students that they are already, at that very young age, praying for their future spouse and children. The responses are priceless!! We give thanks for our health, especially after getting over from being sick.

But when was the last time you gave thanks for your clothing and shoes? We kind of take them for granted. My guess is that your closets and shoe racks are pretty full. What about being thankful for good government? Our land is still the freest in the world. The apostle Paul commands us to pray for and give thanks "for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way" (I Tim 2:1-2).

I've always been intrigued by Luther's inclusion of self-control and good reputation. My guess is that we haven't prayed for and been thankful for those gifts. The apostle Paul says self-control is a fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22. Proverbs 22:1 says that a good name is to be chosen over and above great riches! Luther reminds us that we should be thankful for more than the material things of life. Thank the Lord for His spiritual gifts too, most especially the gift of faith in who God is and what He's done to redeem us and makes us His own dear children. That briefly covers the *for what* question.

Dear saints, tomorrow is thanksgiving. And there is much we should rejoice in. But please remember, some in our communities, in our congregations, maybe in our very near families, may find it difficult to be thankful. Pray for them, support them. The apostle Paul encourages us to "rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (Rom 12:15). By so doing, everyone will be able to give thanks in the proper way and in the proper time. For us Christians, giving thanks is more than tradition, the 4th Thursday of every November. It's who we are in Christ. May your thanksgivings be rich and joyful as you grow in the realization of who God is and what He gives.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.