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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY
Thanksgiving Eve
November 26, 2014
Text: I Timothy 2:1–4

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

The fourth Thursday of November is here! The festivities are well underway. Families are traveling. Many of the various dishes for tomorrow's feast are already prepared. Thanksgiving has arrived! And a joyous day it promises to be. We gather tonight, in advance of tomorrow's activities, in order to do what the name of the holiday says, give thanks!

Moses, in the verses just following tonight's OT reading, commands the children of Israel to remember the Lord's blessings and give thanks for them, lest they forget and turn away from faith and trust:

Take care lest you forget the LORD your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery..." (Dt. 8:11–14).

That's a different way of thinking about giving thanks. Remember and give thanks so that your most holy faith remains alive and vital.

In truth, we remember and give thanks every Lord's Day when we join together as God's people to listen to His holy Word, sing His praises, eat His commemorative thanksgiving meal of body and blood, and rejoice in the past, present, and future blessings promised to all of God's redeemed people. Giving thanks for all of God's benefits is what we do; it's part of who we are. But we must remember why we give thanks lest our giving of thanks become empty, shallow, or hypocritical. The Lord has redeemed us unto Himself and promised a glorious future!

The Apostle Paul instructs Timothy, that young pastor just beginning his ministry in Ephesus, on how prayer should be offered in Christ's Church. We heard it in tonight's

epistle reading from I Timothy 2. “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, 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 Timothy 2:1–2). Again, that’s a different way of thinking about thanksgiving and prayer! We pray for all in authority for the express purpose of being able to lead peaceful, quiet lives in godliness and dignity.

We do this every Lord’s Day in the prayers of the Church even as we will do so tonight in this prayer service. Without fail, we pray for all in authority at all levels of society. And yes, we give thanks for all legitimate authority as the apostle says, “thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions...” Let’s clear the air...it can be difficult to give thanks for those who exercise authority over us. Who among us likes to be told how, when, and where to do the things we want to do or even to do things we don’t want to do?

We’ve just come through a somewhat contentious mid-term election cycle. The Republican Party regained control of the Senate. And wouldn’t you know, before the next Congress is even sworn in, there is political strife between Republican Congressional leadership and President Obama, our Democratic President. As citizens, we might get a bit frustrated at the inherent strife associated with our nation’s political life. But as Christians, we give thanks for them! For through them, the Lord is exercising His authority in our lives so that we may live peaceable lives in all godliness and dignity. So, thanks be to God for everyone who exercises authority in our lives.

Just before I entered into this pulpit, we read together the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed with Luther’s catechetical explanation. At Thanksgiving, we are more inclined to give thanks to God the Father almighty for the various earthly gifts and blessings He gives in creation. Luther teaches us to confess that we believe God is the creator of all things: all animals and creatures, our bodies and souls, eyes, ears, and all our members, our reason and seasons and He continues to take care of them. God the Father provides our clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, family and everything we possess. And as if that weren’t enough, Luther reminds us that our heavenly Father defends us from all danger and guards and protects us from all evil. These are certainly reasons enough to give thanks on the 4th Thursday of November as well as every day of the year!

But Luther reminds us of an even greater Biblical truth in his explanation. God the Father does all these things “only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me.” It’s in God’s character to give His good gifts freely and graciously. Our giving of thanks is a joyful, heartfelt response to God’s grace and goodness. If we fail to remember God’s nature and character, Thanksgiving becomes another requirement of the Law: give thanks this way but not that way and so forth. But that’s not what our thanksgiving is all about. Our duty to thank and praise, serve and obey God flows out of hearts and souls redeemed by God’s goodness and kindness.

That’s what underlies our desire to remember God’s benefits; that’s where we began this sermon, in Deuteronomy 8. Remember and give thanks lest we forget God’s grace and mercy especially seen in the Lord Jesus. And then we went to I Timothy 2 where we heard Paul’s admonition to give thanks for all legitimate authority. Through them, the Father works his goodness and grace in this world so that we, His people, may live godly and noble lives in peace and tranquility of heart and mind. In all these things, God is giving Himself to us and for us. From hearts filled with simple gratitude, we offer our thanks.

All that we have is one gift after another. Your bodies and souls, spouse, children and family, country and government, food and drink, money and possessions, time, talents and abilities are all given to you by God, given to you so that you can experience and know His love. May God’s grace enrich your Thanksgiving celebrations, tonight, tomorrow, and into all eternity.

O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good, and His mercy endureth forever.

✠ 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.