

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
11/25/2009, Thanksgiving Eve
Giving Thanks at All Times and in All Places
Matthew 6:25-33

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

²⁶Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? (Matthew 6:26, RSV)

The year of our Lord 1863 was a tumultuous year, with emotions forging ahead in every direction, running wildly over the terrain of human emotions. The times were both intensely sad and intensely good. The year was sad, for it was a time of war, right in the midst of our Civil War. Our land was filled with war's bloodshed and heartache. But also the times were good, for the Holy Spirit was still moving, still loving, still yearning for human hearts, and still establishing churches. Indeed, that year, 1863, was the beginning of our dear church here, Immanuel Lutheran Church.

In that tumultuous year, President Abraham Lincoln issued the official proclamation creating our national holiday, Thanksgiving Day. President Lincoln did not want to deny that times were tough. He just wanted to say that even in tough times, we should give thanks to God for many blessings. There is no sufficient summary of Lincoln's words nor replacement for his eloquence, and so let me simply read aloud his Proclamation. I think you will see that he combines beauty of language, with piety, not hesitating to speak of God to the people:

Proclamation for Thanksgiving

Abraham Lincoln

October 3, 1863

By the President of the United States of America.

A PROCLAMATION.

The year that is drawing toward its close, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature, that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever watching providence of Almighty God.

In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign States to invite and provoke their aggressions, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere except in the theatre of military conflict; while that theatre has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union. Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defence, have not arrested the plough, the shuttle or the ship; the axe has enlarged the borders of our settlements, and the mines, as well of iron and coal as of the precious metals, have yielded even more abundantly than heretofore. Population has steadily increased, notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege and the battle-field; and the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years with large increase of freedom.

No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy. It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and one voice by the whole American People.

I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners, or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility, and Union.

In testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the Seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the City of Washington, this Third day of October, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and of the Independence of the United States the Eighty-eighth.

By the President:
Abraham Lincoln

William H. Seward,
Secretary of State

In our liturgy, Sunday by Sunday, we speak of how proper it is that we should be a Thanksgiving people. I do not chant well, you know that, but I do the best I can with these words because they mean so much to me:

It is indeed right and salutary that we should at all times and in all places offer thanks and praise to you, O Lord, holy Father, through Christ our Lord... (LBW, the beginning of a typical Eucharistic Preface.)

When we pause to ponder what Christ has done for us and how he gives us hope beyond our deserving, it is indeed “right and salutary” that we should be a Thanksgiving people.

Faith declares that our chief blessing is Jesus. Yet we have other reasons for thanksgiving too. For example, I received a letter recently from a son, writing about his ninety-six year old mother. This dear woman is near the end of her days on this earth. When one is so very elderly and in such decline, it would be easy to be preoccupied by aches and pains and regrets. Who could blame a 96-year-old person for complaining? Yet this son was able to tell me about something that must have touched his heart deeply and warmly. Whatever aches and pains his mother might have had, she set them aside in order to speak of her love for her son:

Saturday afternoon, he told me that she was pleased to be my mother and indicated that she is ready to go.

And so it is that “in all times and in all places,” this dear woman still had a thankful heart. Her love and gratitude waxed strong, though her body was waxing weak.

You and I have similar reasons for gratitude this Thanksgiving Eve and Day. We have people who are dear to us, and thank God, for each of them! We have some measure of strength and hope and help in this world. And chief of all, we have the hope of the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

In this evening’s Gospel Lesson, Jesus teaches his followers to fear not, but to trust in his heavenly Father:

²⁵”Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on.

Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

This is a beautiful passage. My heart rejoices in it, but there was a cost to be paid that its words should prove true. Why need we not worry overmuch? Why be not anxious about our lives, about what we shall eat or what we shall drink or what we shall wear? Answer: because Christ is working with all his might to save us, to make it possible for us that we will land safe on yonder shore, to celebrate the great “victory feast of our God.”

Tomorrow’s Thanksgiving Dinner will be great! But even more is in store for us, through the grace, merits, and labors of Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.