

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
11/24/2010, Thanksgiving Eve  
Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Philippians 4:4-9, John 6:25-35

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

My text is from this evening's Epistle Reading, from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians. The apostle writes this:

<sup>4</sup>Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup>Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup>Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication *with thanksgiving* let your requests be made known to God. (Philippians 4:4-9, NRSV)

St. Paul refers to two kinds of prayers here: prayers of *supplication* and prayers of *thanksgiving*. Both kinds of prayers are important. Both help keep our faith alive in a world that sometimes vexes us, sometimes tempts us. Prayers of "supplication" are pleas to God for help. We face trouble and we know it, and therefore we cry out to our heavenly Father for help. Such prayers change the world! That is not too high a way to put it. Luther simply took Jesus at his word when our Lord praised prayer:

<sup>7</sup>Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: <sup>8</sup>For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. (Matthew 7:7-8, KJV)

Luther concluded then that we should ask, seek, and knock in the confidence that thereby we will find. It might take a while to recognize the granting of the prayer, but we will, for our Lord says so. Let us not do ourselves harm, then, by failing to offer God our supplications.

But on this Thanksgiving Eve, I want to focus on the other kind of prayer: the prayer of thanksgiving. When you say your table grace tomorrow, it is a good thing you are doing. The blessings we have come to us from the hands of God, and it helps us to understand that if we pause to give thanks. Anyone can pray. Say, "Let us pray." Hold hands, and say a simple prayer of thanks for God's blessings in your life."

And those blessings might be more considerable than we suppose. That is one advantage of prayer. It helps us to pause and take stock of the good things we have.

That is a theme in one of Sheriff Bell's monologues. Sheriff Bell is a character in Cormac McCarthy's novel *No Country for Old Men*. The novel was made into a

movie by the same name. It won “Best Picture” in 2007. Tommy Lee Jones plays Sheriff Bell, which is perfect, with his craggy face and sad eyes.

Sheriff Bell is a lawman in south Texas in the 1980s. He has reached the end of his career and has never actually had to kill anyone. In fact, he recalls that some of the old lawmen did not even carry guns. But he knows how to use his guns, and the times have grown more violent during his years as sheriff. He is amazed and disheartened by the violence. By nature he is a gentle man, just trying to help folks. Toward the end of the book, he reflects some on why he wanted to serve as sheriff in the first place:

I’ve thought about why it was I wanted to be a lawman. There was always some part of me that wanted to be in charge. Pretty much insisted on it. Wanted people to listen to what I had to say. But there was a part of me too that just wanted to pull everybody back in the boat.<sup>1</sup>

And that’s a line that means a lot to me. “...a part of me too that just wanted to pull everybody back in the boat.” I think that’s why I wanted to be a pastor. I just want ‘em back in the boat, back following Jesus.

Anyway, here is the passage I so much like about thanksgiving. Sheriff Bell starts off reminiscing about getting started as a lawman:

I was sheriff of this county when I was twenty-five. Hard to believe. My father was not a lawman. Jack was my grandfather. Me and him was sheriff at the same time, him in Plano and me here. I think he was pretty proud of that. I know I was. I was just back from the war. I had some medals and stuff and of course people had got wind of that. I campaigned pretty hard. You had to. I tried to be fair. Jack used to say that any time you’re throwin dirt you’re losin ground but I think mostly it just wasnt in him. To speak ill of anybody. And I never did mind bein like him. Me and my wife has been married thirty-one years. No children. We lost a girl but I wont talk about that. I served two terms and then we moved to Denton Texas. Jack used to say that bein sheriff was one of the best jobs you could have and bein a ex-sheriff one of the worst. Maybe lots of things is like that. We stayed gone and stayed gone. I done different things. Was a detective on the railroad for a while. By that time my wife wasnt all that sure about us comin back

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<sup>1</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* (Vintage Books: New York, 2005), page 295. By the way, Parish Secretary Karen Rombey, who typed up this passage for me, wants to state for the record that the grammatical and punctuation errors in this quote are not her fault! And naturally, they are not. They are put of McCarthy’s writing style in many books. He is a brilliant writer, but indifferent to traditional punctuation. Or rather, his punctuation seems to follow the rhythms of ordinary speech and thinking instead of formal writing.

here. About me runnin. But she seen I wanted to so that's what we done. She's a better person than me, which I will admit to anybody that cares to listen. Not that that's sayin a whole lot. She's a better person than anybody I know. Period.

People think they know what they want but they generally dont. Sometimes if they're lucky they'll get it anyways. Me I was always lucky. My whole life. I wouldnt be here otherwise. Scrapes I been in. But the day I seen her come out of Kerr's Mercantile and cross the street and she passed me and I tipped my hat to her and got just almost a smile back, that was the luckiest.

People complain about the bad things that happen to em that they dont deserve but they seldom mention the good. About what they done to deserve them things. I dont recall that I ever give the good Lord all that much cause to smile on me. But he did.<sup>2</sup>

I think many us can say Amen! to that last line: ... don't recall that I ever give the good Lord all that much cause to smile on me. But he did.

This might be a hard stretch of life for you, with more than a fair share of troubles and heartaches for you. Bad things might have happened to you that you do not deserve. Still, two things come to my mind for even the most disappointed of us:

First, tomorrow, Thanksgiving Day, when you bow your head and say your table grace, do try to bring to mind some of the good, earthly blessings you have. For one thing, if you have a roof over your head and some food on the plate, you are a whole lot better off than many people in this hard world. And if you have some people who think kindly of you, that is much better than having the whole world forget you. And if you still have some strength in your body and a reasonable expectation of some time ahead of you, then you have time and hope that tomorrow will be better than today. And that is worth something. Some people don't even have that much.

Plus, you might have some things that simply give you joy, even if everything else is rather crummy. Our cat, Nermal, for example: he has been walking like a drunken sailor recently, and the doctor warned us he might have an inner ear infection, which would be manageable, but he might also have a brain tumor. Glad to say, he is responding to antibiotics and is back to old mischievous ways. I am glad to *say* that. I should also be glad to *pray* that. That's what prayers of thanksgiving are: pausing to give thanks to God for blessings that we believe we would not have if the good Lord did not open his hand and grant them to us.

But beyond this, we have the theme of this evening's Gospel Lesson. In that reading, Jesus starts off by challenging the people to lift their thoughts from good old earthly bread, which is a very good thing in this world, to the Bread of heaven, which is even better:

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pages 90-91.

<sup>26</sup>Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.  
<sup>27</sup>Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. (John 6:26-27, NRSV)

This Bread of heaven is the fundamental factor that changes tragedy into triumph, poverty into plenty, loneliness into the company of the entire communion of saints, and a guilty conscience into a peaceful one -- one in which the good Lord removes our sins from us as far as a rocket ship could fly:

<sup>12</sup>As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us. (Psalm 103:12, KJV)

Try to remain calm and helpful till then. The resurrection of Jesus means that no one gets away with anything. It also means that no lowly one is left condemned to suffering for ever, but rather can look forward to that heavenly banquet in which tears are replaced with joy, age upon age, world without end. And that is something worthy of Thanksgiving. Have a good one in the name of Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.