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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
11/27/2013, Thanksgiving Eve
Thanksgiving for Immanuel, for Health, and for Many Blessings

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

I found a lovely text for this evening's sermon in a recent Psalm I used in my morning prayers. You might be interested to hear that, like Luther of old, I tend to build my prayers for you on the Psalms. Likewise, my prayers for all the people of our parish and for the whole earth are based on the Psalms. I read the Psalms first, and then offer a prayer for you based on what I have read. Psalm 40 happened to have the perfect verse for this Thanksgiving Eve sermon. Verse 5 goes like this, in the old King James Version:

⁵*Many*, O LORD my God, are thy wonderful works which thou hast done, and thy thoughts which are to us-ward: they cannot be reckoned up in order unto thee: if I would declare and speak of them, they are more than can be numbered. (Psalm 40:5, KJV)

The verse uses the word “us-ward.” This is old English, but you get it, don't you? The Psalm is referring to the many thoughts of God which are directed *toward us* — “us-ward.”

Psalm 40 is a Psalm of David. The man's mind and heart are overflowing with gratitude. He can hardly count the blessings of God on him and the people of Israel. He cannot reckon them up. If he were to speak of each one, it would take a long time. Probably forever.

Likewise with me. In this sermon I have it on my mind to give thanks for this congregation, Immanuel Lutheran Church, and to give thanks for the individual blessings you and I have been given. It could well take me a good long time to do justice to the matter. And I won't do justice to the matter, I fear. How could I when we think of all the good people this congregation has known over the century and a half? But let me at least make a beginning in giving thanks for our congregation and for the various blessings you and I have received.

One of the advantages of a long ministry in one place is that the pastor is able to recall dear folks from earlier years — folks that people in the current generation might not have known. Yet they were wonderful folks, and it would have been a blessing for anyone to have known them.

For example, going back to the early days of my ministry here, you might join me in being pleased just to hear the following names again. Some of them have died and moved into the nearer presence of Christ. Others have moved away. But they were all important congregational leaders for us over the years. These are but a few of our leaders over the past twenty-two years, but it might well bring a smile to face to think of these folks:

- ✠ John Puelle and Ester Miller, both now of blessed memory
- ✠ Paul and Nancy Buscemi
- ✠ Ted and Carlynn Matern
- ✠ Jim and Sandy Paul
- ✠ Hans and Siri Quitmeyer
- ✠ Oscar and Priscilla Schaedle
- ✠ Tami and Auxford Burks
- ✠ Drew Ertman
- ✠ Michael Bergner
- ✠ Lauren Oglesby (now married to Doug Smith. They have three children.)
- ✠ Alan Hoffman, Max Petschek, and Sheila Burton, all of blessed memory

All of these folks were important congregational leaders for us. We do well to give thanks to God for them.

And then there were people I thought of as spiritual giants in the congregation. They were not necessarily congregational leaders — their days of leadership might have been behind them — but they lifted the spirits of many of us and gave us good examples of holy living:

- ✠ Louise Schalow
- ✠ Margaret Stanschus
- ✠ Florence Becker
- ✠ Ann Siemer

Ann still lives, thanks be to God. In fact, we heard videotaped greetings from her at our recent Heritage Sunday. But Louise, Margaret, and Florence are now all of blessed memory.

The mention of Florence Becker leads my mind back in time even more, to an earlier generation of leaders before my ministry. I have heard that Florence Becker's brother, Otto Becker, for example, was a crucial help to our congregation.

I think of “the Karls” — Karl Ehrmann and Karl Fritsch — and Lud Mayleas and Charles Mauer. I did not know Charles Mauer, but I have met the two Karls and Lud Mayleas.

Going back farther, I am always pleased to think about the Superintendent of Sunday School for a good portion of the 1900s John T. Lucker. If you go down to our undercroft, you might notice a plaque saluting Mr. Lucker. It rests above the coat rack near the Lexington Avenue door. I love to hear Ann Siemer talk about Mr. Lucker moving among the hundreds of Sunday School children we had back then, urging them on in their singing.

And the mention of Mr. Lucker’s plaque reminds me of some of the wonderful clergy who have served Immanuel over the years, for we have plaques for some of them. On the back wall of our church nave you will find big polished granite plaques saluting our founding Pastors, Rev. C.J. Renz and Rev. Louis Halfmann (1866-97), and one of the historic clergy of New York City, Rev. William F. Schoenfeld (1898-1919). And when it comes to clergy, I cannot help but speak of my great predecessor Raymond Schulze. Now, there was a man I honored.

It seems to me that the Lord has always provided good people to our congregation at the needed time.

Later in this liturgy, Tiffany is going to sing a lament for us from Leonard Bernstein’s *Mass*. I will speak of that some more in a few minutes. But the mention of Bernstein’s *Mass* leads me to think now of the painful conclusion of that composition. The Celebrant, poor man, has been so challenged and broken down by the doubts, anger, and contempt of the world toward the faith and the liturgy of the church that he has a kind of psychological breakdown. Some of the few lucid words he murmurs are these:

How easily things get broken...

And that is true. A congregation can be good and strong in one generation, and broken to pieces in the next. We cannot take the existence and prospering of any congregation for granted. If a congregation endures in health it is because of the Lord and good people.

Even when times are bleak, the Lord always has his remnant — people he lays hold of and who respond by faithful work in time of need. Some of you in this congregation are among those who are holding our congregation steady. Future generations will also look back on you with gratitude. And some of you here are people the Lord is *in the process of* laying hold of, and you will be leaders of this congregation in the future.

So, on this Thanksgiving Eve, I say we can thank God for his goodness to our congregation all these 150 years. We can bow our heads and say, “The Lord has provided.”

PERSONAL THANKSGIVING

Now let's move on to the personal side of things. Not only has God blessed our congregation, but he has blessed each of us too. Let me speak of myself on this occasion. I am glad to give thanks to God for being alive and for many blessings.

I've told you much of this story before, but let me review things a bit. On August 21 I had open-heart surgery to repair a dangerous congenital heart defect. The usual first symptom of this defect is "sudden death," which is a striking phrase.

The problem with my heart is that the left main coronary artery, instead of originating in the aorta as it should, originated in the right main coronary artery. These two coronary arteries are important because they nourish the heart muscle itself. But my arrangement was called an "unfavorable configuration" of heart vessels. It worked, but was vulnerable to a crucial vessel being clipped off. Then the person falls down dead, as sometimes happens to young athletes.

I had none of the classic symptoms of heart trouble — no palpitations, no shortness of breath, no pain. The problem was discovered due to the curiosity and diligence of my cardiologist, Dr. Irene Glasser, who asked me to have a certain cardiac exam, which revealed the problem.

When Dr. Glasser got the results of the exam, she asked me to come to her office. She told me I needed open-heart surgery, I said okay, our family had a nice supper together that evening, I entered Mt. Sinai hospital the next day for the pre-operation procedures, and then had the surgery the following morning.

All went well. And my recovery has been going well.

Now, I do not want to over-estimate this adventure. I figure that my open-heart surgery is small potatoes compared to what many people go through. It is minor, in my mind, compared to chemotherapy, or to chronic problems like Multiple Sclerosis or Rheumatoid Arthritis. It is even minor compared to long-running poverty or loneliness that can grind people down. I mean, the thing about my surgery is that I either survive it or I don't. If I survive it, then I can look forward to full recovery, eventually. If I do not survive it, then I am off to be with the Lord. It is as Saint Paul said,

For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's. (Romans 14:8, KJV)

So, I do not want to overestimate what I have been through.

On the other hand, I do want to speak of my open-heart surgery because it is the biggest medical adventure I have had so far and because it has this special feature: It leaves me grateful to God for his *continual* care of us.

That is the big thing, from a spiritual point of view: The Lord's eye is upon us continually. He never forgets us, not even for a moment.

The peculiar thing about my congenital heart defect is that I could have died at any moment during my sixty-two years. I didn't know I had this problem. Carol and I just went about a normal life. But I believe that I was continually resting in the everlasting arms of God, who kept me alive moment by moment. And then, when time might have been running out on this unfavorable configuration of heart vessels, he arranged for good doctors and nurses and hospital staff high and low to take care of me and put things right.

"Be ye not anxious," says Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount. Now I listen to that dear preaching and apply it to myself, and I ask you to apply it to yourself too:

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? ²⁷And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? ²⁸And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? ³¹Therefore do not be anxious, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" ³²For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. ³⁴"Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day. (Matthew 6:26-34, RSV)

Why, even the very hairs of your head are all numbered (Matthew 10:30), and on Thanksgiving Eve and Thanksgiving Day, this is a true reason to bow our heads at the table grace and give our thanks to the God who continually cares for us.

Finally, let me say this: If we do not do this, life will be the poorer for it. That's what Tiffany's song is about. If we get out of the habit of table grace and goodnight prayers... if we never stop to ponder how good the Lord has been to

us and to give thanks for all his blessings... if our hearts are never merry so that we say:

Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name. (Psalm 103:1, KJV)

... well, if we never take time to say Thank You to God, then we coarsen ourselves bit by bit and we miss out on a lot of reasons for some joy in this life.

We have a Saviour, Jesus Christ, who is our continual reason for thanksgiving and for hope for eternity, and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.