

Give Thanks

Psalm 100

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November 20, 2016

Psalm 100 has a few words that serve as an introduction. The words read, “A psalm. For giving thanks.” When do you give thanks?

- We give thanks during times of victory and triumph. The football player who crosses the goal line...the gymnast who nails a perfect landing...the contestant on The Voice who makes it to the next round...the candidate with the most votes...the person holding the right numbers for the lottery...the student with an acceptance letter...captures the joy of the exultation and celebration by giving thanks.
- We give thanks during times of feasting. The potatoes have been mashed, the stuffing has been stuffed, the pies have been baked, the rolls have been buttered, the cranberries have been sauced, the gravy has been stirred, the places have been set and the candles have been lit, when the guest of honor makes her grand appearance, yes, I mean the turkey, and she sits right in the center of the table, with every eye fixed in anticipation and every mouth sighing, “ooh...aah”, there is that special moment, that sacred moment, when we stop, when we pause, when we reflect, and when we pray. We give thanks.
- We give thanks when we get swept up in the wonder and awe of creation. When something as simple as a brightly tinged leaf flutters to the ground or a squirrel playfully buries an acorn...or something as wonderful as a super moon fills the night sky with radiant light...when the snow falls high on a mountain and it melts and joins stream to stream until there is a mighty river and rushing waterfalls which eventually race to the ocean where the waves crash with majesty and might...to standing at the base of giant sequoia whose roots run so deep it might have been born before that blessed babe in the manger at Bethlehem...when any and all of these things and so many more miracles of creation cause us to bow down in humble adoration...we give thanks.

It makes perfect sense to give thanks in times of victory, times of feasting, and when we are surrounded by the goodness and grace of creation. The bible is clear that these are appropriate times to give thanks. From the opening sentence in Genesis we celebrate God’s good and wonderful creation. The bible tells of singing and dancing during times of victory, times of deliverance, times when the enemies are scattered and the mighty foes fall on their face. And the bible is not averse to feasting, in fact commanding the people to gather three times every year for feasts and celebrations. The bible knows about giving thanks when times are good.

And yet the bible also teaches us that we can give thanks when times are not so good. Psalm 106 calls for the people to give thanks to the Lord, even as it recounts times when Israel sinned, did wrong, acted wickedly, and rebelled against God. They forgot God and did not wait for his counsel. How can that be a psalm of thanksgiving? What Israel learned through their repeated failures was that the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever. When Jerusalem fell and God's children endured the deep sadness of living as exiles, strangers in a foreign land and ever so far from their home, God's children discovered that the compassion of God never failed, that even in exile his mercies met them in new ways every single morning. From this long season of lament emerged an insight that has comforted countless people through the ages: Great is the faithfulness of God. One of the most inspiring and encouraging passages in the bible is when Paul, the Apostle of the Lord writes to the church in Philippi. At this point Paul is in prison and has endured countless trials and tribulations. So what does he do? He gives thanks. He gives thanks for the faithful believers who have been his partners in the gospel, and he gives thanks for the power and presence of Jesus Christ, through whom he says we can do all things.

Psalm 100 has a few words that serve as introduction. The words read, "A psalm. For giving thanks." And that is all it says. I believe that means we can give thanks at any and all times, in each and every situation. How? This morning, as we enter into the week of Thanksgiving, it is my hope and prayer to explore not only how we give thanks in all things, but more importantly, why we give thanks in all things.

Over the last few months the lectionary has led us to some verses from Psalm 119. I mentioned at the time that Psalm 119 is an acrostic. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. The psalm is formed by 22 stanzas, each stanza being eight verses long. The first stanza begins the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the second with the second, and so it goes through all 22 stanzas. The focus of Psalm 119 is the word of God, and this use of all the letters of the alphabet allows the psalmist to praise the word of God and reflect on its worth and value in just about every detail you could imagine. It is exhaustive in a very good way. While I was studying Psalm 119 one writer commented that he also had found using the alphabet to be an effective tool. "Of all the sermons I have preached over the years, the one with the most enduring impact is titled 'A Thanksgiving Alphabet.' It is exactly what it sounds like: going through the alphabet from A to Z listing the things for which I am particularly thankful. As dreadful as it sounds, the idea has remarkable staying power. I have used it so much I have forgotten where I stole it from."¹

¹ David W. Ruhe, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 4, p. 252.

David Ruhe has obviously preached before because he recognizes the danger of using the alphabet is that people know what's coming. It is literally a predictable sermon, A, B, C...Yet he writes that in his experience, the predictability is generally more pleasing than oppressive. In fact, he purposely begins his thanksgiving acrostic sermon with some clunkers, like Ambiguity, Balderdash, and Chocolate, almost inviting the congregation, "to improve on what they are hearing."

How do you give thanks? It's as easy as your A, B, Cs....Let's sing the Alphabet Song together, and along the way we'll stop to offer thanks.

- A, B, C, D...This one is easy for me. Dunn's Corners Community Church, Presbyterian. From a phone call in August 2014 from Sandy Haney to a first visit that happened to be on the weekend of the Christmas Bazaar to hearing members of the Pastor Nominating Committee speak with such openness, honesty, and vulnerability about their faith and their hopes for growing as a church to that first Sunday when we met you all, to the ministry we share together the D is my Thanksgiving acrostic is definitely, decidedly, and downright desirably Dunn's Corners.
- E, F, G, H...H gives me the opportunity to give thanks in times that are disastrous and disruptive. H is for Hurricane, specifically Hurricane Katrina, which displaced hundreds of thousands of people in New Orleans and across the whole south. Many of them came to Houston. As terrible as that storm was we saw churches band together, we saw people open their hearts. One woman living in a small two bedroom apartment, facing many challenges of her own, opened her apartment to displaced family members and more than 20 people crowded together to find shelter after the storm. That Thanksgiving of 2005 our church hosted a community Thanksgiving Dinner. Many from Katrina had been worshiping with us, and to see the family of God gathered together, enjoying a meal together, finding some comfort, some hope, was truly a cause for giving thanks.
- I, J, K, L, M...Mercy. Shakespeare penned a beautiful tribute to mercy. "The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice blest; it blesseth him that gives and him that takes." (Merchant of Venice) We as the children of God have been blessed with mercy. It hasdroppethed like the gentle rain from heaven upon us. So it is that in the beatitudes Jesus tells us, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy."
- N, O, P, Q...Quiet. Maybe we should use both the Ps and the Qs and have Peace and Quiet. The God who gave us Sabbath rest is the one who said, "Be still and know that I am God." In God's mercy he leads us beside still waters and he restores our soul. Peace and Quiet.

- R, S, T, U, V, W, X, Y, Z...For me Z is always the Zoo. I love the Zoo. Have you ever seen such an odd assortment of animals, all of them testifying to God's creative ability, intricate design, and even God's sense of humor. A woman came to a church we served and she sang a song about creation. "In the beginning God made the seas and the valleys filled with trees. He raised the mountains up so high, at the very top he placed the sky. God's fingerprints are everywhere just to show how much he cares. In between he had loads of fun, he made a hippo that weighs a ton. Hip, Hip, Hip, Hippopotamus, Hip, Hip, Hooray God made us." (Mary Rice Hopkins) How do you cap off an acrostic of thanksgiving? How about taking a trip to the zoo and singing Hip, Hip, Hip Hooray God made us.

I am leaving all 26 letters of the Alphabet here. You are invited to come and fill in the acrostic with your words of thanksgiving. If 26 is too many letters for you, another way is to write the word THANKSGIVING and write a word of thanks for each of those letters. I tried an activity with our Wednesday Bible Study where I gave everyone a blank piece of paper. I had them draw an outline of their hand, and it was supposed to look like a turkey, with a head and four feathers. For each of those, the head and feathers, I asked the group to fill in a word or reflection on thanksgiving. It might have worked better if I had a big butterball and gave everyone colored pieces of paper in the shape of a feather and had them attach their thanksgiving to the body of the turkey. What I am doing is suggesting that there are many ways you can give thanks, and it is a thanks that covers A-Z and all things in between.. Give thanks in all things.

We have had a little fun with alphabet games and hip, hip, hippopotamus. But I also want to explore the depths of thanksgiving. This can touch situations in our lives where we are vulnerable and places in our heart that are tender. Mat and Margaret were a husband and wife who farmed in Kentucky. Their story was set around the time of World War II. Their son Virgil goes off to war, and dies. Obviously, they are very sad. But they work out their sadness differently. Mat is stuck in his loss. His hurt knows no end. Margaret, perhaps miraculously, perhaps as a result of a deep and trusting wisdom, is able to accept the death of her son.

One day Mat and Margaret are sitting on their front porch, swinging back and forth. They are sitting next to each other, but the loss of their son has created a vast gulf between them. Mat opens up a bit, and says the sense of loss isolates him. He can't get over it. And then Margaret says something very wise.

"Mat, when we've lost it all, we've had what we've lost."

Mat responds, “But to lose it. Isn’t there anything in you that rebels against that?”

She thinks a while and then says, “No. From the day our son Virgil was born I knew he would die.” From the day he was born she knew he would die. But that did not stop her from enjoying each and every moment of his life. I’m sure she hoped he would die as an old man, but she knew, because death is part of life, that her son would one day die. He died young, which was tragic. Still, her wisdom allowed her to say, “When we’ve lost it all, we’ve had we’ve lost.” The memories, the love, the relationships, the laughter, the tears. When we’ve lost it all, we’ve had we’ve lost. So finally Margaret says to Mat, “I don’t believe that when his death is subtracted from his life it leaves nothing. Do you, Mat?”

And a window opens in Mat’s soul. Light shines in. He answers, “No, I don’t” Thanksgiving might well call to mind the things we have lost, the loved ones we have lost. But I pray that God will bless us with the ability to remember that we had what we lost, and when it is subtracted it does not leave nothing. We are left with rich remembrances of times of the deepest joy. For that may we give thanks.

I didn’t have much luck with our bible study class in drawing a turkey, so let me try another approach. What if you drew a fish and used that as a model for thanksgiving. In a sense that is what the early Christians did. At a time when it wasn’t safe to publicly declare your faith, they would draw a picture in the dirt of a fish. In the fish they would write the Greek word for fish, Icthus. Those early Christians used the letters of the Greek word for fish, which in the Greek language are five letters, to remind them of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior. The psalm says, “For giving thanks.” Could you use the Icthus, the fish, as a means of giving thanks? For God so loved the world he gave his one and only Son. Jesus Christ is God’s Son, our Savior. God became one of us, lived as one of us, walked and talked. Every touch in the gospel, of the leper, the lame...every one he called...everyone he healed...every time he forgave or blessed...thank you Jesus. One little fish can lead to such a long litany of thanksgiving.

And now I want to try to tie this whole theme of thanksgiving together. We have had letters of the alphabet, letters of the word THANKSGIVING, turkeys with feathers, a fish and the deep symbolism of the Icthus, we have shouted hooray for the hippopotamus and rejoiced in the quality of mercy. Now I want to return one more time to the alphabet. I have spread out the 26 letters of the alphabet on the ground before our communion table. No matter who you are, no matter where

you were born, no matter what your net worth is, no matter if you are young or old, no matter your level of education, every single one of you, every single one of us, can walk up and with this alphabet we can form the letters that make up our name. Your name is here. Just pick the letters and your name is here. When it comes to giving thanks, don't ever forget the importance of your name. When Jesus tells us he is the good shepherd he says that he knows his sheep by name. Some of the most moving moments in the bible are when God calls his children by name. Abraham, Moses, Samuel, and in the garden on the first day of resurrection Jesus called to a woman whose heart was overcome with grief and sadness, Jesus called to her and he called her by name. Mary. That Good Shepherd who knows his sheep by name knows your name.

Karl Barth wrote *The Church Dogmatics*, a set of books that explore in great depth what God was doing when he sent Jesus Christ into this world. The Church Dogmatics stretches to 13 volumes and more than 8,000 pages. In the seventh volume, and after 4,000 other pages, Karl Barth. When he gets to reconciliation you see themes coming together and the gospel coming to life. Some of what he writes nearly breaks your heart and brings joy to the deepest places in your soul. Barth writes about the obedience of the Son of God. God did not simply send Jesus. The eternal Son of God went with obedience, and the eternal Son of God became human because of God's great love. There is a section that describes *The Way of the Son of God into the Far Country*. The title alone evokes images of the Prodigal Son, but now instead of a son who leaves his father and wastes the family wealth, we have a Son who in obedience goes to the far country himself, to rescue and redeem God's precious children. It is late in the volume on reconciliation that we understand the full impact of what God is doing through Jesus Christ. According to Barth there comes a moment, a moment of faith, a moment of awakening, a moment of reconciliation, where the child of God looks at everything God has done, the great faithfulness, the great sacrifice, the great love, and realizes it was all done as Barth puts it, "Just for him."² Christ Jesus became a servant "Just for him." It was just his place he took on the cross. He died "Just for him." It was just his pride, just his fall which was overcome. And it was just him that was filled with the Holy Spirit. He even says Jesus did not will to be Jesus without being just his Jesus. The world was not to be reconciled with God without just this person as an isolated individual being a human—this person—reconciled to God. The whole occurrence of salvation was not to take place but just for him. When Barth writes just for him, he means just for you.

² Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics IV.1, The Doctrine of Reconciliation, p. 754.

Psalm 100 is a psalm for giving thanks. We give thanks for the joys and blessings, the triumphs and the times of celebration. We give thanks for the joys and the sorrows of life, for God has been present in it all. More than our own lives we look at the life of Jesus, this precious gift God gave to this world, sending his Beloved Son. Every blessing of Jesus is for us. And so whether we walk up and touch and reflect on each letter of our name, or simply run through those letters in our mind, let us give thanks that he knows us by name. He created us by name. He loves us by name. And when we doubt that, when we find it hard to believe, when we feel forgotten or forsaken, he says, "I have written your name on the palm of my hands." He will never forget you, he will not forget your name, and he will definitely not forget how much he loves you.

So on this day, in this house, in the presence of our God, surrounded by his love, filled with the Holy Spirit, may our hearts be filled to overflowing with thanks. Thanks be to God. In all things, we give thanks to God.