

26 November 2003
Thanksgiving Eve

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“What Are We Saying When We Say ‘Thank You’?”

Text: Matthew 6:24-24

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

I would like to offer for your consideration this evening what may sound like a very simple question: what do we mean when we say “thank you”? We say it a lot. Perhaps most of the time we say thoughtlessly. But what are we really saying?

And so think, for a moment, if you receive a gift from someone – what will you be thanking them for? I suggest to you that it’s not just for the material gift, but that there’s much more to it than that. You are thanking them also for thinking about you. You are thanking them for spending their precious time to select a gift. You are thanking them for choosing to spend some of their money on you. You are thanking them for the joy and happiness their gift brings to you. And much, much more. There is a lot that lies behind the gifts that we receive.

And so too with the gifts that we receive from God. Tonight we gather to give special thanks to God for all that He has given and done for us, but what are we thanking Him for? *What lies behind* all of His gifts to us? . . . To get you started thinking about that, I offer you this quote from Martin Luther about the work of God in this world.

“For in the sight of God [we Christians are] esteemed higher than the whole world, so that for [our] sake God sustains the world and gives it all it has. Hence if there were no Christians on earth, no town or land would have peace, yes, in one single day the devil would ruin everything there is on earth. The fact that there is still corn growing in the fields, that men recover from their illnesses, that they have food, peace and security, all this they owe to the Christians.” (Day by Day We Magnify Thee, p. 369)

So to put that in other words, if you thank God for your house, what lies behind that gift? What works of God? What planning of God? Well, it would go something like this: God says, I want to provide Michael with a good house. So I will make some trees grow straight and tall and strong. I will provide good workers to harvest those trees. I will make sure the truck driver gets the wood to the mill. I will make sure the mill workers cut the wood safely and properly so that it is good and strong. I will make sure the wood

gets to where it needs to be for Michael's house. I will make sure the workers are alert and follow the plans. I will make sure they use the right tools, and nothing is forgotten. I will have a banker open a bank close by, so that Michael can get a mortgage. And there's a whole host of other considerations I didn't even think of! But you get the picture – what are we thanking God for?

Or another case: say you wish to thank God for your health. What lies behind that gift? God says, I have my child Sarah that I want to grow healthy and strong. I will see to it that there are men to discover and make the medicines she needs when she gets sick. I will have a doctor open a medical office in Springfield so she can get care. I will make sure the nurse who cares for her gets a good nights sleep the night before, so she will be awake and alert. I will make sure the needle that get manufactured are made right and work properly. There is so much to thank God for!

Or one more: we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "*give us this day our daily bread.*" And we thank God for it. But what lies behind that gift? God says, I will make sure there is good seed for the farmer to plant. I will send rain to water the seeds, and sun to make the plants grow. I will make sure there is a harvest, and machines for the farmer to gather the crops. I will have men invent trucks to haul and deliver the food. I will make sure there are grocery stores close buy, so that my children can buy the food. I will use the stock people to make the food available, the cashiers to check them out, and good strong bags to carry the food in. I will have factories built to process and make the food. And that is only to provide our food! But daily bread includes everything that we need for life – and God is giving and taking care of it all!

You get the idea. And, as Luther said, in all these ways, God is not only providing for us, His children, but also unbelievers benefit from these things as well. But they do not recognize or thank the giver of these gifts.

Now, some people will have a problem with all that I've said here, thinking that God is really not all that involved in these things of life! Rather, some think that God made the world, wound it up like a clock, and is now simply sitting back and watching it work. And so the fact that we have all these things is not really God doing all of it as I have described, but the working of the world as He made it. Just the way things go.

But if you think that, I would counter with the words of the Holy Gospel that you heard this evening. Those words which spoke of God feeding the birds of the air, and clothing the lilies of the field. And then there are other words of God which tell us that He knows about every sparrow that falls to the ground, and that He knows the exact number of hairs on your head. No, God is not sitting back, watching! He is active! And He is active for

you! Working through men and women, in the vocations He has given them, to provide for you and me all and exactly what we need. And if we realize that, and trust that our Heavenly Father is working, and caring for even then small details of our lives, then we will not worry or be anxious about these things, or about tomorrow – for as we heard, ***“[our] Heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”***

And in seeking first His kingdom, we thank Him also, and most especially, for His Son Jesus Christ, and all that He came to do for us in His birth and life and death and resurrection and ascension. In giving us Baptism to make us His children. In giving us His body and blood in Holy Communion. In giving us His Church, and Pastors, and His Word, and everything else that we need for salvation. . . .

And as we have been doing, think what all is involved in that! The Scriptures tell us that even before the foundation of the world, God planned for our salvation, and planned to send His Son to die for us. He promised Adam and Eve that He would send a Saviour. He kept the lineage going that would produce the human nature of His Son. He sent His Son at just the right time. He provided trees and wood for the cross that would kill His Son, but save us. . . . And He appointed apostles to found and establish His New Testament Church. He strengthened them as they gave their lives for the faith. He had churches built. He made sure the truth of His Word was proclaimed through all generations. He enabled the printing press to be invented, and Bibles to be printed. He had seminaries established to train pastors. He has faithful parents bring their children to be baptized and confirmed; faithful Sunday School teachers to teach them. He gives devout husbands and wives to each other. He gathers His children in places and established through them congregations, and He brings others to hear His Word. And on and on it goes.

And we say thank you. Thanks be to God . . . and we don't even realize what we're saying! The magnitude of all that God does for us is truly too much for us to comprehend! . . . And yet that's okay. The simple, and perhaps ignorant, thanks that we give to God is precious to Him. Because it is offered in faith and trust. Childlike faith and trust, that even though we do not know and cannot comprehend all that God is and all that He is doing, we know that He is working for us. That He has chosen us, that He is providing for us, that He is taking care of us, that He is forgiving us, and that He is saving us. There is nothing that we have that He did not give; nothing that we are that He did not form; nothing that we do that He is not working in and through us. He is all in all. He is our Father and Saviour.

And so as we gather this night to give thanks to God, it is with great humility. His

goodness is so great, His gifts so staggering in their volume, His love so enormous. And compared to all of that, our thanks seem so insignificant, so “not enough.” . . . And yet it is all that He desires. . . . Thank you Father, that you are our Father. Thank you Jesus, that you are our Saviour. And thank you Spirit, that you have called us and adopted us to be children of God. Thank you for all that includes, or as we pray when we pray the Lord’s Prayer, as Luther explained: *“God certainly gives daily bread to everyone without our prayers, even to all evil people, but we pray in this petition that He would lead us to realize this and to receive our daily bread with thanksgiving.”*

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

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.