

23 November 2005
Eve of National Thanksgiving

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Goodness in Action”

Text: Psalm 107

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

The Psalm that we sang this evening was a rather lengthy one. But I will tell you that it could have been longer – much longer! For when you are listing out the things for which to give thanks to God, it is a long list. And that is when you only list the things that we can think of . . . there are also the things that we *forget* to give thanks for, and then *also* the things that God does in our lives that we do not *think* to give thanks for. The things that seem to us to be bad things, unfortunate things, things that we would rather not have in our lives. *Even these*, the Psalmist reminds us, are things for which we should give thanks.

And so the first verse of the Psalm sets the stage for the entire Psalm – and so it is the verse that we used as the antiphon, singing it throughout: **“Oh give thanks to the Lord for He is good, for His love endures forever!”** It is the word *love* in that verse that is the key, for it is a Hebrew word that is rich in meaning, and so it is often translated in many different ways: love, steadfast love, kindness, goodness, mercy, compassion, favor, benefits, and even beauty. And its meaning includes all of them! It is what God is, for He is all those things. Luther’s definition of this word was a good one too. He explained it as meaning “goodness in action.” (*Luther’s Works* vol. 49, p. 50) And that is what God is for us: goodness in action, in all things.

Now it is true that we do not always *see* or *recognize* that fact, that in all God does He is “goodness in action.” *But that does not make it any less true.* . . . We heard in the Old Testament reading that the forty years of wilderness wandering the children of Israel had to endure was to humble them, **and it was good**. For when God humbles us, it is so that we might learn to rely on Him and Him alone. And in the midst of that wandering, they were not without God’s love and care, as He gave them manna, meat, water, clothing, and protection. . . . We heard there also of God’s discipline, **and that it is good**. For when God disciplines us, it is so that we might learn not to love sin and walk in ways that are hurtful to us; ways that lead away from Him, for He is leading us to a good land, a Promised Land, a Heavenly Land. And if left to ourselves and our own devices, it is a land we would never see. But God, in His love, does what is necessary for us – as hard as it may be! That we might receive His promises. And **it is good**. All of it, *goodness in action*.

We then heard in the Epistle that we should “***not be anxious about anything***” – which implies that there will be things that happen in our lives that could (or will!) make us anxious! But that for these things, we should give thanks. For despite appearances, **it is good**; *goodness in action*. . . . And then in the Holy Gospel, when the ten lepers cry out to Jesus for help, what does He do? He first sends them away! An act which to the eye makes it seem as if He doesn’t want to be bothered with them. But the reality is just the opposite – **it is good**; *goodness in action*.

And so the thing about God’s goodness and love is that it so often cannot be seen. Perhaps it can best be described as like an iceberg. What we see, that *actually looks like* God’s goodness and love, is only a small part of all that He is doing in us and around us. The majority of His “goodness in action” cannot be seen – indeed, may not even (as we have been considering) – may not even look like goodness, but something out to sink us! **But faith knows that it is good; God’s good; all of it.** Or, to quote Luther again, in commenting on Job – a man who knew a thing or two about God’s goodness, even in the midst of trouble – “*He did not simply look at the evil, as would-be saints do; he kept in sight the goodness and grace of the Lord. . . . We are also to look at our misfortunes in no other way than that with them God gives us a light by which we may see and understand His goodness and kindness in countless other ways. Then we conclude that such small misfortunes are barely a drop of water on a big fire or a little spark in the ocean.*” (Luther, *Ibid.*)

And where this is most true and certain for us is the cross. For there, to the eye, is no good thing. There is only trouble and humiliation and defeat. But faith knows that the reality is the opposite. That the cross shows us, like nothing else, **God’s goodness in action**. God’s goodness in offering up the life of His Son in our place. God’s goodness in providing for us what we needed most of all – the forgiveness of our sins. For the love of God is more than just hanging clothes on our backs, stuffing food in our mouths, putting bigger and better roofs over our heads and more presents under our trees! The Hebrew word has it right – it is much, much more than that. It is love that knows no bounds. It is love that does not do what is easy, but what is hard. It is love that loves enemies and sinners, and trades His life for theirs. It is love that suffers and enters the jaws of death. It is love the likes of which we see only pale imitations of in this world, which is perhaps why it is so hard for us to understand. *But that does not make it any less true!* That is what makes it godly.

You know, as people gather around tables all over the country to give thanks tomorrow, many will give thanks for the turkey, who gave its life so that we may eat. And after we eat it, the typtophan in the meat will make us drowsy and we will fall asleep. . . . But as we gather here tonight, around the Table of our Lord, we give thanks to the Son who gave His life so that we may here eat His body and drink His blood. And this meal does *not* put us to sleep, but in fact just the opposite! It raises us from the sleep of death and gives us a new

life. A new life of godly love. A new life that will last forever. A new life where we do not give thanks just with words, but with deeds. Loving as we have been loved. Forgiving as we have been forgiven. *Goodness in action*. Because that is who He is, and that is who you are in Him. And that is truly a reason to give thanks!

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