

Shepherd of the Springs Lutheran Church

Thanksgiving Eve Vespers

Text: The lessons for the day

Theme: ***Being thankful for what you have, and what you don't have***

And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, the he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. (Duet 8:3)

I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. (Phil. 4: 12)

(and God said) ***This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be? So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.*** (Luke 12: 20-21)

Tomorrow our nation will observe again its long standing Day of Thanksgiving, offering up gratitude for all the blessings we have received from our gracious God this past year. As we prepare our hearts and minds to reflect on those things for which we ought to find needful from the Lord and for which we should offer up a special thanksgiving on this occasion, our lessons serve us well to reflect on how we ought not simply count our blessings, but also how we ought to order them in terms of their real importance. Often, however, this is not an easy thing to do. The conditions in our life can often affect our perceptions of what is important and who ought to recognize our indebtedness for what we have - and for that matter, what we don't have. We need to recognize that both come from our merciful and loving God.

As the children of Israel were poised to enter the Promised Land after years of wilderness wandering, the Lord taught them that it was His faithfulness to them according to His Word that sustained them for all the trying years in the desolation of their wilderness wanderings. Yes, he would bring them into a land of milk and honey, but in the wilderness, the adversity and hard times AND the things that sustained them came from God's bounty. The rude wilderness wandering AND the manna, the water, the clothes that would not wear out – it was the mixed blessings of God that preserved them and made them ready to finally enter the Promised Land. It is the Lord's faithfulness to his Word that sustained them in all situations of life. He reminded them that we live not by bread alone - or even cake - we live by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Jesus repeated these words to the Devil in the wilderness when for 40 days even manna was not provided Him. In the Word of God there is life, for from it comes all blessings, and apart from it there is nothing.

We can take this to heart ourselves this evening. Yes, we too are to give thanks for all the milk and honey and their equivalents that He has graciously given to us, but let us also recount the shape and character of His blessings to us in the midst of

adversity, the difficult times, the unknowns of how we will do without what we have expected - the grim times when we know that it is only the Lord Who has sustained us. Is it not true that we usually think of the blessings of the Lord in terms of the quantity and quality of the things that we are receiving or experiencing during our lives? Thus, on this basis, when things are going well, when we are enjoying great bounty; we think of these times as being richly blessed. Conversely when we are experiencing want; when things are not going well for us; when we are experiencing deprivation and suffer from it; . . . we may be tempted to think that His blessings are in short supply. We may wonder if God has forsaken us, or if we have fallen out of His favor. And it raises the question: Why is it *truly meet right and salutary that we should at all times and all places give thanks to God* as we say in the preface of our Communion Liturgy? When we are experiencing what the apostle Paul said he knew – being brought low, hungry and in need, what is there in these times to give thanks for? The key to the answer to this question is to understand God’s perspective about what constitutes a blessing from Him?

From God’s perspective, a blessing is either something that He gives to us or an outcome that accords with his purposes according to His mercy. In other words, the Lord’s blessings are those things that He gives us or things that He accomplishes for our good, often by withholding his bounty for a time. He blessed the apostle Paul with given bounty and abundance, yet He also blessed Him through hunger, suffering, adversity, and poor health by using these things to strengthen his faith Paul’s awareness of the sufficiency of God’s grace and that His strength was being perfected in his weakness. And about these things Paul is no exception. God is at work to bless you in the same ways. He blesses you in plenty and He blesses you in want; He blesses you in adversity and with joyous times, in hunger and in bounty – in the things He gives to you, and in the things that He accomplishes for your good in the things that He chooses not to give to you. If the good things of this life do not lead to his desired outcomes according to his mercy, these are not ultimately blessings but tragedies.

And that brings us to the parable of the Rich Fool. Tragedies not blessings can come from what otherwise would be understood as good things from the Lord. There should be no doubt that the grain and the barns of the Rich Fool came ultimately from the One who is the Lord of every harvest. Yet, the trust of the man in such things and the belief that they were outcomes from his own labors were both foolish and tragic. They cost him his soul. So some blessings bless as the Lord intends, while others are instruments that ultimately may lead to ruin. What blessing does anyone really have - gaining the whole world but forfeiting his soul? As with the Rich Fool, is it not true that a continual rich bounty of his blessings constantly received seems often to provoke in us sinners a sense of self-satisfaction and a desire for more? Have you experienced the coveting spiral: The more you have, the less you appreciate . . . And then, the less you appreciate, the more you want . . . and the more you get of what you want, the more you may think you can just continue to get them endlessly. That’s the way it was for the Rich Fool with his bumper crops and bigger barns.

Perhaps we need to give thanks to the Lord not only for what he gives us, but also for the things that he withholds – the things that He does not grant us to sharpen our awareness and appreciation of his goodness and mercy. Yes, the Lord's blessings are mixed. He blessing is what He gives and in what He withholds. And, it is often in what he withholds that enables His strength to be made perfect in our weakness, building a healthy sense in us that His grace all sufficient for us. His bounty is to be gratefully enjoyed as he blesses us with it, but never to be coveted, taken for granted, or made into your treasure.

The parable of the Rich Fool reflects an important piece of wisdom: we should value our blessings and treat them in accord with their ability to provide for our needs with the understanding that it simply is not true that you only go around life once . . . life is forever. The fool is a fool because he invested himself with lesser blessings of the Lord and made them his own *treasure*. A person's *treasure* is whatever he thinks will secure the good life and a happy, contented future. To be rich means to have your treasure in abundance. It is outcomes, worked out by even fallen means that God gives to us the one treasure that will not disappoint.

God grant us the mind and heart to measure our treasure from the riches of God's grace, and at the same time praise Him from whom all our blessings flow, using them also as stewards that serve Christ in our neighbor's need. And let us understand and appreciate that He often may grant us our greatest sense of thankfulness and gratitude for his blessings in the midst of our own poverty, adversity and want - keeping us mindful that all that we have and all that we are come only from His bountiful goodness. And for that, as with our nation, we may on this occasion of our National Day of Thanksgiving - *give thanks unto the Lord for He is good, and his mercy endures forever.*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. A-men.