Thanksgiving

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Last Pentecost/ Christ the King; November 23, 2014

Saint David’s Episcopal Church

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:1-23; Matt 25:31-46

We have a lot going on today! It is Thanksgiving Sunday. It is our United Thank Offering In-Gathering. And it is the day we dedicate our pledge cards.

It is also the last Sunday of the Christian year, Christ the King Sunday. Next week we begin the new Christian year with Advent.

All that makes this a good day for us to look back over the past year, to think about our reasons for gratitude, and to give thanks to God for them.

The United Thank Offering is a way we express our gratitude to God. So are our donations and our pledges.

But if you have some particular reason for gratitude that you would like to offer to God, write it down. I put scraps of paper and pens in each row. Fold the paper in half and, when the time comes, put it in the collection plate. I will leave the plates on the altar while we celebrate the Eucharist as a way of offering everything up to God. After the service, I will make sure all the paper gets recycled without anyone reading it, so what you write will remain between you and God.

It is important to pause every once in a while to give thanks for the good things in our lives. We so easily take things for granted.

In the Northampton paper yesterday, an editorial began by giving thanks for working toilets. Apparently last Wednesday was World Toilet Day. Who knew?

The editorialist went on to note that something like 35% of the people around the world—that is, something like 2.5 billion people—do not have access to functioning toilets. As a result, lots of people end up drinking contaminated water and some of them die.

I have not spent a lot of time giving thanks for a working bathroom. That is one of those things I tend to take for granted. But, given the alternative, I am mighty glad to have a working bathroom! And so on this thanksgiving Sunday, I give thanks to God for indoor plumbing.

That’s just one small thing out of millions of possibilities. If we were really to pause, if we were really to stop and think about all the reasons we have to be grateful, we probably would do nothing else but give thanks.

And our thanks would pretty quickly go beyond things like toilets, wonderful though toilets are.

The Apostle Paul begins virtually every letter with thanksgiving. In our reading from Ephesians for this morning, he says “I do not cease to give thanks for you—the Ephesian Christians—as I remember you in my prayers.”

Then Paul lifts his vision up higher. Paul prays that God will give the Ephesians “a spirit of wisdom and revelation” so that “the eyes of their hearts will be enlightened” and they may “come to know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.”

I am going to say that last part again. Paul hopes that Christians—the Ephesians in that time and us in our time— Paul hopes that Christians will know the hope to which God calls us, the riches of Christ’s inheritance among the saints, and the immeasurable greatness of God’s power working in and for us.

If we could really know all that hope and that richness and that power, we would REALLY be thankful for God’s love and grace.

And yet, somehow, sometimes, we lose sight even of that.

Thankfully, our worship is a reminder of all that God has done for us. And at the center of our worship each week stands the Eucharist.

The Eucharist is itself an incredible gift. Literally the word “eucharist” means “good gift.” The Eucharist is the gift of God for the people of God. It is the sacrament of Christ’s body and blood. When we participate in the Eucharist, we feed on Christ in our hearts, by faith, with thanksgiving.

But sometimes we just go through the motions even of that. We recite the prayers. We eat the bread. We sip the wine. And then we’re done. Ho hum.

If ever I start to just go through the motions, one of our younger and more active members calls me back.

When I come by with the wafer, he always gives me a big smile. When I hand him the wafer, he always gives me an enthusiastic “Thank you!”

I love that.

He probably does not understand what the Eucharist is all about. I think he is thanking me since I am the one who just handed him the wafer. But, of course, I am not the one who makes the Eucharist a good gift worthy of great gratitude. God is the one who does that.

But our young member does understand at least this: the Eucharist really is a good gift and the proper response really is gratitude.

In fact, gratitude is not strong enough. If we stop to think about what Christ has done for us, about God’s love and forgiveness and grace, about all that the sacrament represents and all that it is, stunned amazement is probably closer to what we ought to feel.

But genuine gratitude is enough. And most of us indicate that by saying “amen.”

The Great Thanksgiving is basically one long prayer that ends when you receive the bread and the wine. That is when most people say, “Amen.”

Amen literally means something like, so be it. I hand you the bread, I identify it as the body of Christ and the bread of salvation, and you say “amen,” “so be it,” “yes, Lord,” “thank you!” And as our young and enthusiastic member reminds us, we should mean it.

Another place we express our thanks in the service comes at the very end. After the final procession, after the candles are put out, after the last hymn is sung, I say the words of dismissal. And most weeks, I end with “alleluia, alleluia!” And you say your line, ending with “alleluia, alleluia.”

Alleluia is like a cheer for God. It is a way of saying, at the very end of the service “thank you God for everything, including the opportunity to worship you.

Next week, as we enter the new season of Advent, the tone of our services will shift. It is customary to drop the alleluia’s during Advent, and then to bring them back at Christmas.

So today is the last chance you will have for four weeks to give God a little cheer by saying “alleluia” in Church. Take advantage of it. On this thanksgiving Sunday, when we collect our United Thank Offerings, and dedicate our pledge cards, and celebrate Christ our King, say “alleluia” with spirit as a way of giving God thanks and praise.

And as you say alleluia, remember that “the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, gives us a spirit of wisdom and revelation as we come to know him, so that, with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we may know what is the hope to which God has called us, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.”

On this day, I pray that we can all be properly thankful for that incredible gift.

Thanks be to God. Amen.