

With Songs of Praise

sermon digest

November 24, 2013

Colossians 3:1-3, 12-17

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Have you heard the clamor? It isn't new. It happens just about this time every year. Retailers, trying to get a head start on Black Friday sales, create a furor as they announce earlier and earlier times for opening their doors. Friday's 6 and 7 a.m. have become 4 a.m. and then 10 p.m. and midnight Thanksgiving Day. This year Macy's is at the center of the controversy. This great benefactor of the 87 year old national tradition, the annual Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade, has announced plans to open its doors to shoppers at 8 p.m. Thanksgiving evening. The announcement has been met with shock and censure and even some widely circulating petitions. Of course other stores have already done the same thing. But Macy's? How could they? "It is the death of Thanksgiving," one horrified observer proclaimed. And more than likely, one pulpit after another will follow suit this morning all across the country.

Has Macy's (along with Walmart, Target, Toys "R" Us, and others) put a dagger into the heart of Thanksgiving? Are the retailers merely taking advantage of what has been fondly labeled "retail therapy"? Are they merely meeting a need (or desire)? Or are they feeding at the trough of greed and accentuating a failure of spirit in our midst? As we sit back and click our tongues at throngs of people trampling one another to get to the latest must have bargains, should we rather or at least *also* be looking closer to home? Is the best the church can do in the midst of our unfolding social reality just to wag our finger on the order of a scolding mother and say "you people ought to be thankful." Or is there something more basic involved here in terms of who we are and what we should be about as church? Concern for what the extended work hours may mean for families is legitimate; but what attitudes and practices toward giving thanks should we be fostering within our own faith communities?

Praise and thanksgiving celebrate the faithfulness of God. "What," the first and perhaps most important question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, is our chief end as human beings? Our chief end, the answer comes, "is to glorify God, and to enjoy [God] for ever." Our lives are given to us, the church affirms, that they might be lived in praise and thanksgiving to God. "Doxology," as Patrick Miller puts it, "is our reason for being—and joy is the final outcome of God's way with us" ["In Praise and Thanksgiving," *Theology Today*, 1988]. More than a creative formulation of the mid-seventeenth century, the affirmation of praise and thanksgiving as the impetus for everything we are and do envelops the whole of the Judeo-Christian tradition. From the magnificent hymns of creation in Genesis, the Book of Beginnings, to Miriam's celebration along the banks of the Reed Sea to the heights of praise in the Psalter to the Magnificat of Mary, the prologue of John and the repeated strains of thanksgiving in the letters of Paul, praise and thanksgiving to God are front and center.

"The Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing," the Deuteronomist informs his people. And when you get there, he goes on to chide them, *do not forget* "the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness." Do not pat yourself on your back as if you have achieved all of this on your own, but live in memory, in thoroughgoing gratitude to the God who has been faithful to you. Israel lived out of its "historic creed," out of memory and thanksgiving to the God who had seen the suffering of a people and acted on behalf of their deliverance. The Exodus in the First Testament speaks to God's grace, God's salvation, in the same way Christians think of God's gracious action in Jesus.

Thanksgiving does not wait on a perfect world or the end of suffering. The book of Psalms, so raw with the heights and depths of human emotion, speaks honestly and openly to human pain and suffering. It speaks unblushingly of human frustration and anger at God. It looks the human experience directly in the face, not seeking to hide from the reality it sees, not seeking to pretend that things are not as they are. And yet it contains the highest words of praise anywhere in scripture. Psalm 22, the Psalm whose opening Matthew and Mark place on the lips of the dying Jesus, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," speaks of abysmal human suffering. "Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?" it demands of God. "I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people. All who see me mock at me; they make mouths

at me, they shake their heads.” Wrestling in the midst of lament with the promises of the faith that have kept and guided his people Israel and his own life, the psalmist moves from petition (“Deliver my soul . . . Save me”) to blessing and promise: “I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you. God did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; God did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried. From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him. All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. To God, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before God shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for God. Posterity will serve God; future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.

In a similar manner, Paul, often called the “apostle of joy,” returns to the theme of thanksgiving and praise again and again. Sixty-two times thanksgiving is mentioned in the Second Testament. Paul is responsible for three-fourths of those references. Philippians, his “epistle of joy,” is written from his prison cell; and yet it drips with thanksgiving for this particularly loved little Christian community that he fathered; and it counsels them, despite the bothersome division and dissension within their own ranks and the derision they are encountering from the outside, to live and rejoice in the confidence of God’s nearness.

Praise and thanksgiving to God are transformative. Thanksgiving and praise do not wait on an answer to all our prayers but live in remembrance of God’s faithfulness in the past and assurance of God’s presence in the present and future. We celebrate the God who promises “I am with you. I will help you;” and the experience and anticipation of that presence transforms us. We need not become something on the order of the syrupy, sweet Pollyanna of children’s fiction a century ago who welcomed every disappointment and trial with joy. The honesty of scripture before God in times of hardship indicate that we may air our struggles, our frustration, our anger before God without fear of reprisal. However, the experience of God’s consistent presence in the midst of hardship strengthens us and gives us peace. The church’s theologians have spoken of that strengthening, that return of hope and meaning in the face of difficulty as the all important “in spite of” aspect of faith. We hold onto faith in God’s love and presence even when the pain of the moment seems to overwhelm us and are strengthened to hope in God still.

Praise and thanksgiving, however, are not just about what happens in our own little corner. They are rather about the “great congregation” of whom the psalmist speaks. They are about the support, the counsel, the teaching and admonishing of one another to which the writer of Colossians bids us. They are about “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” that bind us to one another and to God. “Thanksgiving and praise by their very nature,” Patrick Miller suggests, “reach out, draw in, encompass, and involve others. . . . Christian community is created, enhanced, and strengthened in the joy of praise and thanksgiving” [185-186].

Praise and thanksgiving have a way of forever widening the circle. They bind us to the loving congregation into which we gather, and they impel us beyond any closed concept of neighborhood to which we would confine ourselves. “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt,” the Torah proclaims. And then it continues with a pronounced “therefore”. “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, *therefore* you shall be just in all your doings. You will remember and aid the widow, the orphan, the poor, the landless. Remembering your time as sojourners in Egypt, you will welcome and extend kindness to the immigrant in your midst. Remembering God’s gracious deeds and celebrating them in worship are critical, but they are not enough. Authenticity demands that praise and thanksgiving issue forth in the care and inclusion of those who are suffering and weak.

So, as we gather together in one more season of Thanksgiving, hear this: Our songs properly sung, our praises adequately raised, our thanks appropriately spoken are not restricted to the time of the year or that portion of the human race that looks like and acts like us. Thanksgiving is a national holiday, but even as a national holiday it is about more than striking our breasts and boasting of our great successes and the favor with which God holds us. It may well be about thinking about our priorities and the well being of the families of the sales clerks and choosing to abstain from the crazed competition to grab the best bargains. As people of faith it is certainly about acting in concert with the Israelites of old and bringing our “first fruits” to God. It is about giving our best offerings of worship, raising our voices in

joyful song and singing the attitudes and actions of our lives in gratitude to the God who has made us, who has loved and kept us, who will be with us now and evermore.