20 November 2022 The Manifold Grace of God Thanksgiving

For the church, Thanksgiving Day is a reminder that gratitude is the hallmark of the Christian life. It is an acknowledgement of life as gift of a generous Creator.

In the words of Psalm 100:3, “Know that the Lord is God. He made us, and we are His.” Creation is not something God did long ago and far away and then vacated the scene. God’s creative act is an eternal gift of being to the whole of space and time, sustaining all things in existence in every moment.

We are entrusted, in the words of 1 Peter, with stewardship of the gift of being. Stewards, not of time, talent and treasure, that shop worn trinity of stewardship programs, but stewards of the manifold grace of God.

It is easy to imagine ourselves, not as caretakers of the garden of life, but as owners, possessors. In a world that lives by the calculus of *quid pro quo*, this seduction of pride in our self-sufficiency and autonomy leads to greed and eventually predatory violence toward those who threaten our guarded surplus.

Our pride readily turns to despair when we realize we cannot make our world safe and happy for ourselves. Gratitude is the antidote to pride. Life is not our achievement but gift. Gratitude is the antidote to despair. In every circumstance we still live by gifts faithfully given. Gratitude is a form of vigorous resistance against the seductions of a *quid pro quo* world.

The hymn we will sing in a few moments, “Now Thank We All Our God,” is a model for a life of disciplined gratitude. Yes, gratitude is a discipline. As Samuel Johnson put it, “Gratitude is the fruit of great cultivation; you do not find it among gross people.”

Now thank we all our God, with heart, and hands, and voices,

who wondrous things hath done, in whom this world rejoices;

who from our mother’s arms hath blessed us on our way

with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us!

with ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us;

and keep us in his grace and guide us when perplexed,

and free us from all ills in this world and the next.

This warm intimate poetry was written by Pastor Martin Rinkart as a table grace during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) that devastated all of Europe. His wife died of the pestilence and he wrote this for his children. The hymn affirms that we are on the receiving end of God’s goodness even in the most dire circumstances.

This alternative way of being in the world, alternative to the common fear, greed, and violence that marks our public life, has immense practical implications. Gratitude is an act of subversion that sees our neighbors, not as competitors for scarce resources, but as common recipients of the gifts given to us all.

We are so created that our freedom and happiness are contingent upon our stewardship of the manifold grace of God, on giving as we have received.

Jesus instructs the crowds looking for security, hoping to win the lottery so they can eat, drink and be merry (John 6:27), “Do not work for food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will *give* you."

A wise woman traveling in the mountains found a precious stone in a stream. The next day she met another traveler who was hungry, and the wise woman opened her bag to share her food. The hungry traveler saw the precious stone and asked the woman to give it to him. She did so without hesitation.

The traveler left rejoicing in his good fortune. He knew the stone was worth enough to give him security for a lifetime. A few days later, he came back to return the stone to the wise woman.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said. “I know how valuable this stone is, but I give it back in the hope that you can give me something of even greater worth. Give me what you have within you that enabled you to give me this stone.”