

Give Thanks to the Lord, for He Is GOD!

“Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever.”

When we print the bulletin, it gets checked several time for errors. First, I run it through the spell check. I print off a copy for our secretary, Ella, who reads through it and marks any errors she finds. Jennifer, who makes the slides ready for church, checks for errors. And Adam, who gets the slides ready for church, lets me know if he finds any. So it goes through three or four editing steps before we print. You would think each bulletin is perfect.

When you look at today’s bulletin, it looks like one error slipped in. The theme for my sermon today comes from Psalm 136 and it is the prayer many of us use at dinnertime: ***“Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever.”*** Yet, I typed, “Give Thanks to the Lord, for he is GOD,” not good. But this is not a mistake. I intentionally worded it that way. I did this because I learned that in Old and Middle English the word “good” was spelled as “god.” So you can argue that good and god are the same. I have another reason for wording it this way. God is always good to us. Anything he does for us, even if it means letting trouble come our way, will be made into good. So let’s give thanks to the Lord, for he is God.”

I. Beware of negative thanks.

We know we should give thanks to God. That is why you are here today or watching online. But do you find yourself being thankful with only half a smile, or with one thankful arm tied behind your back? I like to call it “negative thanks,” or thanksgiving with a “but” in it. Let me give you a couple examples.

I know you are thankful, but maybe we are thankful only for the good things. We want to forget the bad things. “Thank you, Lord, for a good harvest, for abundant food, for my house. Thank you for that new daughter or grandson, for money in the bank.” This is where it gets negative, when we add a “but.” “But, Lord, I want to forget about the time I broke my hip or had that car accident, or when I sat at the deathbed of a loved one.” And don’t hide it. It seems harder to raise voices in thanksgiving during COVID.

It is good to dwell on all the good things in life, but forgetting about the troubles we face means we are only half way thankful. We may not know it, but we saying God is good, but not all the time; he loves us but his love doesn’t endure all the time.

We could adopt the opposite of this and say things were not as bad for us as others. There is an old Chinese proverb that goes like this: “I complained I had no shoes till I met a man who had no feet.” We all had our ups and downs this year, but there was always someone who had it worse. Yes, we should thank God whenever he keeps harm out of our lives. But do you see how this is also negative thanksgiving? Again we are thanking God but accusing him of not always being good, at least not to others.

These two examples make God into something he is not. Look at our passage for today. ***“Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever.”*** We get the, “Give thanks to the Lord,” part, but then we stop there. We think he isn’t good all the time or his love endures, but not forever.

I. Let’s offer God positive thanks.

So, let’s put the “he is good; his love endures forever” back into our thanksgiving. Thanksgiving Day as we know it really was started by Abraham Lincoln in 1863. Not a bad idea, especially when you consider that our country was two years into a bloody civil war and the population was depressed. It is intended to help us understand that we can be thankful even in tough times.

One way is to see how the Lord continues to provide for us. Our church is decorated with produce and the fruit of the land. All you have to do is drive into the countryside and gaze upon the thousands of acres of farmland. But not everyone is a farmer. I’ve never butchered anything, and I don’t have a half acre for a private garden to grow vegetables. And look at me; I am not starving. All we have to do is drive to the market or the butcher shop or baker and presto, we have food. Other raised these different things so people like me can still eat and eat well.

But all these things, the market, the butcher shop, the farm and farmer, are only the middlemen between us and the true source of all we have and need. Man can manipulate and increase the production of food, clothing and shelter, and this is a skill we owe to God, yet the primary cause of all of this is God’s sun and rain, God’s seedtime and harvest, and the ability to work. Great or small, rich or poor, God is providing for all our needs because he is good.

Also, we humans are not animals who are concerned only with food and shelter. God blesses us with emotions and intellect and desires. We can satisfy our sense of beauty with art, music and literature. I remember in grade school biking all the way to the five and dime store with a few dollars from my paper route to buy one vinyl album. Nowadays you can download and listen to any song in the world for pennies. We have books, and books and more books available to us. We can enrich ourselves through magazines, TV, cable, with education and schools and the internet.

Yes, sinful man can certainly abuse such things and turn them into a license to commit sin and we need to approach everything with Christian discernment, but these things, handled properly, are wonderful blessings. Give thanks to the Lord, for he is God who is always good and his love endures forever.

And we can thank God for his gift of companionship. In the Garden of Eden, it was the Lord who said that it was not good for man to be alone. Now, with COVID and distancing, we realize how much we took for granted this gift of companionship. Even introverts are yearning social contact. Like a stone producing ripples in a pond, each of us stands in the middle of an every widening circle of fellowship. We have family. Next we have close friends. We are members of a church. We belong to a community, to a state, to a nation. All of these things offer us companionship.

And God uses these circles to help us in time of need. He strengthens us at church with his Word and Sacraments. Think of some relative, pastor or teacher, some neighbor or fellow church member who did something for you or said something to you when you needed it the most. Companionship is a blessing. Don't let COVID get in the way. I call my dad, as do my kids. We face time each other. We can worship online. Even without computers, we mail sermons and devotions. Things are not perfect, but find ways. Check on that neighbor. Call. My dad got an old fashioned letter from my daughter. He talked about for weeks. Write.

But most of all, thank God for his salvation through Christ. Go ahead, take everything else away. Imagine the barest and scarcest of food, friends long gone, imagine the absolute minimum you can have. Imagine you are living in a pandemic. You still have reason to be thankful because of Christ. We are thankful because of what he gives us. Imagine someone is drowning in a pond. What is the neighborly thing to do? You could grab some warm, dry clothes and shoes. You can prepare a hot five-course meal. You can take all of these things and set them up on a table by the pond and be proud that you helped your neighbor, right? Wrong. Yes, food and clothing are neighborly things to do, but they are not what this drowning man needs most. He needs you to throw him a life preserver or jump in and drag him back to shore. Then, you can give him warm clothes and a hot meal. In fact a dirty old coat and a lukewarm hot dog would taste just as good.

God provides for all our daily needs. But the thing we need most is deliverance from sin and death and the devil. God doesn't just heap food and clothing and shelter on us while we drown in sins. So he takes matters into his own hands. He knows how impossible it is for us to swim and save ourselves. The Ten Commandments are good, but in the hands of a sinner they become a cement life preserver because they only show us our sins and tell us we should be punished.

But God dives right in and saves us. He came into this world and subjected himself to everything we must endure, especially the constant temptations by the devil. Yet he endured without sin so he could redeem us with his innocent suffering and death on the cross. God drags us to shore. He saves our lives through forgiveness. And then he gives us warm clothes and food and all we need. And it doesn't matter if we eat steak every day or a lukewarm hot dog and wear a worn coat or a brand new one. God is good; his love went so far as to trade Jesus for you.

Do you see how God is good all the time? Once there was a farmer who took a break from his chores. He sat down underneath a walnut tree and began to think. He looked at the walnuts on the tree above him and some pumpkins on a vine nearby and said to himself, "If I was God, I would do things differently. I would have heavy pumpkins grow on a tree and be supported by thick, strong branches instead of these flimsy vines. And I would have walnuts grow on the ground supported by these vines instead of wasting strong tree branches on them." Then a walnut fell from the tree and hit him on the head, and he understood the wisdom of God.

You and I would do things differently than God. And thank him we can offer him suggestions through prayer. But remember this. God is good, not just some of the time. He is good all the time. His love endures forever, not for a while. He knows what to give us, how much and when. He knows when we suffer and when we are desperately in need. He knows when to discipline us and when to pamper us. Most of all he knows our sins, even our secret sins, but he blots them out of his sight with Christ. We can be 100% thankful all the time because he is always God which means he is always good in how he deals with us. Amen.