

Thanksgiving. A Gratitude Attitude? Not Really

Colleagues,

D.v., Marie and I will be in California most of this week, so ThTh 233 gets posted a few days early. Occasion is the memorial service on Wednesday for Marie's sister Dorothy Scharlemann, who died in Santa Barbara just short of her 90th birthday. That's the third such liturgy on Marie's side of the family in eleven months. Next day we'll celebrate Thanksgiving with the larger Scharlemann family of Dorothy's four children.

The proximity of events makes you think. As we did almost 30 years ago when we buried my mother just before Christmas Eve.

Of course, the respective clans had grounds to be grateful. But gratitude is not quite what Biblical thanksgiving is all about. I learned that years ago when we had a semester-long Crossings course on Psalm 118, the lectionary Psalm for Easter, and we looked more closely at the term. Ps. 118 opens and closes with: "O give thanks [you plural imperative] to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever." It's only seven words in Hebrew, and the vocable for "give thanks"—regularly used throughout the Psalms—is tricky. Its root meaning is "praise," says OT grand guru Claus Westermann. "In the OT praise is the most frequent expression of a positive relationship to God. The OT has many verbs for praise, whose meaning is difficult to express in modern languages."

So what is the praise-base of "yadah" [the verb] and "todah" [the noun]? It is first of all not attitude, but action. And above all public action. You don't do "todah" in your heart, but out in the open with other people around. If you'd want to film it,

you'd put someone on a soapbox out on the sidewalk and give her some lines that said: "Look what God did for little old me!" Or in the plural, as it is so often: "Look, what great things God has done for us!" It's "declarative praise," Westermann says. Proclamatory action—a public event. When Paul is hustling the Risen Christ to the cultured crowd on Mars Hill in Athens, he's doing Todah. Or when in autobiographical reflection he marvels (out loud) that although he once was a persecutor of Christ-followers, he's now become one himself, he's doing Todah. "Look what God did to this old enemy of his! By the grace of God I am what I am."

No wonder St. Jerome, when translating the Bible into Latin, the so-called Vulgate, rendered "yadah" with "confiteor"—"to confess, to reveal, to acknowledge, to make known." He had learned Hebrew from a rabbi in Antioch, and must have learned it well to chose that vocable. That Latin term is witness-stand language. It points to a public forum. "Status confessionis," in Lutheran lingo. Fessing up about the Gospel—and, yes, it could get you into trouble. Even so, fessing up to the Gospel so others hear and benefit. [Blessed Jerome, incidentally, did his translation work at Manger Square in Bethlehem, where he lived out the last years of his life 386-420 A.D. If he were still there on this very day, he'd have an Israeli tank "protecting" him, a tank probably "Made in the USA."]

Confessing is not contrary to saying "thank you," but its intended audience goes well beyond God the Giver. It proposes to strike human ears making known the "chesed" (mercy) of God. "Y'all give thanks to God, for his ches ed/mercy lasts forever. And if you ask me why I'm here on the soapbox saying that, I'll say: Thought you'd never ask. Let me count the ways." What triggers "todah" is not gratitude—some tit-for-tat sense of obligation that "since you did this good thing for me, I'll reciprocate and say thanks." Now there is nothing wrong with

reciprocity for benevolence received. But it's too flat for Todah. At root it's still "law," good law, but not yet the response that fits with receiving God's mercy. Which being interpreted is "faith." Not the gratitude attitude, but faith in God's mercy triggers Biblical thanksgiving. Not "be grateful, and say thank you," but be faith-full and tell the world whose mercy it is that lasts forever.

Final anecdote. True story. In ancient days the LCMS used to have an annual "fiscal conference" (I think that was the name) to talk about raising money. Once I somehow got into that solemn assembly. Keynote speaker was Richard R. Caemmerer, the seminary prof who taught me how to preach the Gospel (and in the opening class session he told us that from experience he knew that most first-year seminarians didn't know what the Gospel was. So in session one he told us. Then in session 2ff. he started shaping us to preach it.) I can still see and hear him at that fiscal conference session.

You preach to your people, he said, "Out of gratitude, you should give more generously to the work of the church. Out of gratitude this...and out of gratitude that..." Joe Schmidt sitting in the pew starts twitching. He grabs his suit-jacket lapels, pulls them away from his chest, looks first to the left inside, and then to the right (and RRC is play-acting this at the mike), and says: "What do you know I AM out of gratitude! There's none there." And then ":Doc" concluded, It's faith in the Gospel, not a gratitude-attitude, that generates generous hearts.

We'll be linking Todah and Easter in California this week, not only in remembering Dorothy, but in remembering how God in Christ remembers her, marked as she was by mercy for her own Eastering.

May your Todah be that sort if you're are celebrating American

Thanksgiving Day this week. And if you are in some other spot on the globe, as many of you are, get on your own witness stand and do Todah “your way,” for his mercy endures forever – everywhere.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder