

Thanksgiving – with a Biblical Hebrew Accent

Colleagues

On the second Thursday of each month here in St. Louis the Lutheran Professional Church Workers Conference gathers for worship, program, conversation. I was slotted for the November program segment. “Something on Thanksgiving” was my assignment. But the mini-stroke intervened, and someone else presented on another topic. Yet I had the presentation worked out before my affliction struck. So you now get it for this post on USA Thanksgiving Day 2006. It begins with something I’d been asked to do fifteen years ago for the journal of WELCA (Women of the ELCA). Then follows an add-on that I’ve learned since then about “thanksgiving” in Biblical Hebrew. The finale was musical—and I know of no way to offer that to you via the Crossings listserve. But I’ll still tell you what it was, namely, Heinrich Scheutz’s composition on the “thanksgiving-est” Psalm of all, #136. It is 8 minutes of echoing multiple choruses, holy hilarity, noisy sonority. At one point 17 trumpets are playing!

Schuetz composed it for the 100th anniversary celebration of the Reformation, Oct. 31, 1617. Dresden was the venue for the performance. Somebody, some several bodies, should get to work to have it performed again in our land. Even use the next 11 years to “practice” for some wingding performance (in Carnegie Hall?) on the 500th anniversary in 2017. Any takers?

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

-
1. Thankfulness: An Apostolic Afterthought?[Beginning with the article printed in Lutheran Woman Today (Sept. 1991) p. 5-8.]

“And-oh yes-be thankful.” These words, tacked on almost as an afterthought, are a loose translation of the apostle Paul’s words in Colossians 3:15-his well-known advice about new life in Christ.

Thankfulness an afterthought? For Christians, that can hardly be true. Or can it? Before we answer, let’s examine some New Testament accents on gratitude , thanksgiving, and being grateful-all biblical words that are variations on one “loaded” biblical Greek word, eucharistia (which goes back to the Hebrew word todah-more about that later).

Gratitude. First off, let it be said that gratitude is not an attitude in the New Testament. Nor is it something we do because of the way we feel. It is, rather, an action, a public event. The gospel calls us to thankfulness regardless of how we feel about things, including our feelings about ourselves or about those who receive our gratitude.

The same is true, for instance, in the New Testament Greek term agape, which is not a feeling or attitude of warm fuzzies toward someone. Instead agape is the word that describes concrete help given to someone in need, despite how we might feel about that person. The meaning of agape becomes clear when our Lord bids us to love our enemies, to do genuine good for those whom we clearly don’t like. Even if people are out to “do us in,” we are called to be Christ’s agent and do good for them. So it isn’t gratitude, but something else, that motivates people to

“do love.”

Thankfulness. The same is true for thankfulness. Thankfulness is, in fact, an “after-thought” in that it comes after, or second, in the sequence of Christian living. Faith comes first. It is important to get that sequence straight and understand the reason for it. Let me illustrate what I am talking about with an example from my childhood.

At Trinity Lutheran Church in rural Coal Valley, Illinois, where I grew up, we sang an old hymn each year during Lent that had Jesus saying these words to us: “I gave My life for thee; What hast thou giv’n for Me?” That hymn brought shudders to me every time I heard it. It shattered. For no matter how hard I tried, my “gratitude attitude” was trivial when compared to Christ’s cross.

Christ had done so much for me, the hymn reverberated, and now it was my turn. And it sure sounded to me as if Christ was asking for equity. When instructed that I should do this or that “out of gratitude,” I could only look inside myself and verify that, sure enough, I was “out of” gratitude. Not just fresh out. Constantly out.

Through years of grappling with God’s gospel, I now know the missing link in the sequence from that piece of childhood piety: faith. I knew Christ had done all that stupendous stuff for me, but somehow it didn’t seem to count if I didn’t fork over something comparable in return. My constant dilemma was that I was out of gratitude. Small wonder-faith was missing!

Thankfulness is not, strictly speaking, a response to the gospel. Faith is-and the only proper one. The gospel does indeed call for a response. But the response it calls for

is this: Trust me. The Lutheran confessions hold that the gospel is a promise. But before we can give thanks for promises, we have to trust the promises. Gratitude is a consequence of trusting. So the Christian sequence is, rightly: Christ's promise to us, our trusting that promise, then the fruits of faith-a veritable garden of them-one of which is "and-oh, yes-be thankful."

My move from childhood piety to understanding later in life is the switch from what, in theology, we call law-imperatives to grace-imperatives. Or, more simply put, from law-commands to grace-commands. Both commands issue from God, so we dare not say that people initiate the law-commands, while God initiates the other kind. No, both come from God. The big difference is that Christ is in the second set, and not in the first set. And what a colossal difference that is! Law-commands have a prior condition to them: "If you do this for God, then God will do that for you."

Remember the lawyer in Luke 10 who wanted something from God-eternal life-but kept trying to justify himself, finally asking, in effect, "Who is this neighbor I am supposed to love?" In the Good Samaritan parable that follows, Jesus is trying to tell him-and all of us who will listen-that God-in-Christ acts first, justifying all of us who are "half-dead" in our sins. We all need to be rescued from our own ditches, as different as these may be between individual sinners. Then are we freed, and grace-filled, to see that we are neighbors to all kinds of people. We can perform actions of thankfulness and helpfulness, in faithful response to God and on behalf of others.

For in the grace-commands, Christ is primary and comes

first. The commands that follow Christ are the consequence-not the condition-of the divine action. The grace commands read like this: "Since God-in-Christ did such-and-so, therefore you do so-and-such." Listen to the pattern in this classic grace-command: "...in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself... [therefore] be reconciled..." (2 Corinthians 5:19-20). Notice the grammatical pattern in this grace-command: There is a causative character in the first clause: Since / because God was in Christ reconciling the world, therefore be reconciled to God. Whereas the grammar of the law-command is: If you...then God... In the law-command, God responds to my action. In the grace-command I am responding to God's action in Christ. Thankfulness is like that too. It's in the grammar of grace-commands.

But we are not called upon to do something for Jesus. Jesus is not the beneficiary in the action commanded. Nor are we the beneficiaries. As in the parable of the Good Samaritan, other people are the beneficiaries of those actions. (Compare Ephesians 2:13-22.) And all of the action issues out of God's grace-initiative, flowing from folks who trust it.

The law-commands are something we've "got to do;" the grace-commands are something we "get to do." The former involves coercion, even if it is the gentle coercion of "look at all the goodies you'll get." The latter has no coercion at all, but rather Christian freedom! The former lays assignments upon us with built-in sanctions; the latter opens new doors for innovative sanctification. We get to choose the good we are eager to do for another! Thanksgiving is one of the grace-commands that no one can really tell us how to do, though conversation within the Christian community can help shape us as we seek to do our

faith-filled response.

Perhaps my earlier words about the “gratitude attitude” were overstated. Attitudes are important for how we live and act. But if our attitudes, even our grateful ones, remain only inside us and are linked to how we feel, then Christian thanksgiving is not yet happening.

The book of Psalms grasps the point well when, in Psalms 106, 107, 118, and 136, it repeatedly advises us to “go public” with our faith-filled response: “Oh, give thanks to the Lord.” Why? “For God is good.” How good? Good enough that “God’s MERCY [I’m sticking with the old King James Version term, for reasons we can talk about later] endures forever.” Thanksgiving really is an after-thought, for it is after encountering God’s mercy in Christ, and trusting it, that we go public. In biblical thanksgiving, there is always an audience, for someone outside the thanksgiver is on the receiving end when thanksgiving happens. And that Someone Else is not just God, but all the other folks round about who are listening in on this public announcement.

Even if no one thinks to ask us what is going on, we can tell them anyway. Look what God-in-Christ has done for us! God gives us gifts in our lives. We receive them and we can give them away.

Thanksgiving is one Christian proposal for going public with what has been private experience. It’s no big deal. It’s simply faith in action proceeding from the center of our being to the edges of all the crazy-quilt patchworks that are our lives. Or as the apostle Paul might have put it, “Oh, yes-by the way-be thankful.”

2. Something I’ve learned since then. I’m going to take the NT

Greek word eucharistia, regularly rendered as thanksgiving, to be the translation for the core Hebrew word for thanksgiving: Todah as the noun, Yadah as the verb. Fred Danker tells me that even in today's spoken Greek eucharistia is the standard term for saying "thank you" to anybody about anything. We want to get back to the Hebrew roots for this biblical term, and that pushes us back into the Psalter, as I mentioned before, including the main psalm I want to eventually get to, Psalm 136. But first let's look at the New Testament usage.

Perhaps with one exception, not once in the 33 uses of the word eucharistia does the root word eucharist – either as verb or as noun or as adjective – refer to the Lord's Supper. The one possible exception is in the words instituting the Lord's Supper. All three synoptic evangelists say "He took bread and gave thanks," or "took the cup and gave thanks." But that is standard Jewish piety at any mealtime. Jesus "gives thanks" before feeding the five thousand in the synoptics. St. Paul "gives thanks" when, washed ashore at Malta, he invites his fellow survivors to join him for a meal. And there are a number of other such instances. Nothing sacramental. Just daily bread.

I know there was considerable hullabaloo about this when the eucharistic prayer was brought into our Lutheran Book of Worship. And I don't remember all the arguments. But if no one of the 33 NT references uses eucharist as a synonym for the sacrament, what are the grounds in evangelical catholicism for doing so?

3. Claus Westermann, Heidelberg (Germany) Prof. of Old Testament, writing on the Psalms in Interpreter's Dictionary, calls attention to "the many lexemes for praise" in Biblical Hebrew, and the difficulty to render

them into modern languages. They are multi-valent by comparison. So also the Hebrew term usually rendered as “thanksgiving, O, give thanks,” in the Psalter, namely, yadah , the verb, todah, the noun, the term with which Ps. 136 begins and ends: hodu leJHWH (you plural – y’all – give thanks to Jahweh). Remembering, however, that this is a Hebrew verb of public praise, maybe even standing on a soapbox to do so, it’s not “now write a letter to Grandma thanking her for her Christmas present.” It’s something public and plural. It’s a verb of praise. Gesenius thinks the Hebrew word yad (=hand) might signal the acknowledgement of someone else’s mighty and assisting hand. One thought I have related to that is the idea of “raising one’s own hand” in response to the word/act of another, thus affirming that person, saying “yes” to the person/action. Similar to the Latin word confitemini with which Jerome translated hodu. From which we get our English term confess, that is itself a multi-valent verb (Christians confess such opposite realities: confessing sins / confessing faith). But in all cases Biblical confessing is yes-saying to a prior word/act of God. (God says: “Adam and Eve, you are sinners.” We old Adams, old Eves: “I confess my sin.” Or again, God says: “This my Son is meant for you to trust.” Whereupon we “same-say” what God has just said to us: “We confess our faith/trust in that Son meant for us.”

In both cases the receiver of the prior divine word is saying yes to it. So the NT term for confess (both for sin and for faith) is homologia / homolegein (=saying the same thing) “same-saying” what God said prior to my homology, my same-saying it. That means there are at least two audiences for this “verb of praise.” One is God. The other is all the other folks who are together with me in this “y’all” doing the action, as we will see when we get to

Schuetz's setting of Ps. 136.

And that signals yet a third audience. All those who are listening in on our thanksgiving, but who weren't (yet) involved in the original saying / same-saying exchange between God and the first batch of same-sayers. There's the soapbox, the marketplace, the public forum. Here the door opens for the super-hype that Schuetz puts on the whole action of giving thanks. The thanks-givers are on a roll. That holy hoopla is just "normal" for what the verb wants to convey. 17 trumpets!! Several choirs bouncing the "todah" around – almost as though they cannot stop.

4. I want to conclude by having us listen to a recording of Heinrich Schuetz' choral setting of Psalm 136. The historical background is that Schuetz composed this and directed it at Dresden, Germany, on October 31, 1617, the 100th anniversary of the Reformation, Luther's posting of the 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. That is the date often given for the "beginning" of the Reformation in Germany. This Psalm is unique in the Book of the Psalms in that every one of its 26 verses of thanksgiving ends with "For his mercy endures for ever." Schuetz shows what Westermann said above. "Thanksgiving" is praise. It is public. It is extravagant. You might even say it is "noisy." At one point 17 trumpets are playing along with the several singing choruses—back and forth. I know of two Compact Disc recordings of this music. The one we will listen to comes from Weissenfels, Germany.

I have printed the text out for you—the original German, the English parallel—so you can follow along and join the musicians in thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is not something to lecture about. It is something to do. So let's join Schuetz and the musicians in "doing" our own thanksgiving

to God as they lead the way.