

With Joy and Thanksgiving
DCM

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“We offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us ...” we recite as our offertory in many Lutheran congregations each week. I was caught by this phrase recently as I reflected on my own response of ‘thankfulness’ about life, family, and work. I’m not always very ‘thankful’ I thought.

There’s the rub. Life is complicated and messy with T-Ball, soccer and band concerts layered over two careers with traveling in one household. When is there time? There are days when every relationship I am in is pushed and stretched by commitments and appetites I’m not in control of. Where is there room for thanksgiving?

It was that day the offertory caught me unawares and my thoughts traveled to experiences with my kids and spouse. Thankfulness juxtaposed with offering - receiving placed right up next to giving. If my experience is like yours then we often notice our giving but make few connections between our hard long hours of work and receiving.

My thoughts also went back to Luther’s Small Catechism and the explanation to the First Article.

“God has created me and all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul with all their power. God provide me with food and clothing, home and family, daily work, and all I need from day to day. God also protects me in time of danger and guards me from every evil.” – Small Catechism, Explanation to the First Article

The sense of God’s expansive and abundant provisioning for life, for my life, filtered through my awareness. The daily failures and triumphs at soccer, or work or around the kitchen table just don’t seem as weighty when set in relief against the unrestrained life affirming power of God.

It is a little strange to talk this way when so much of daily life is lived in the ‘little decisions’ surrounding homework and sleepovers and piano practice. But the offertory invited me for an instant to ride out the sanctuary windows and at once look across the ramparts of the world and around the unbroken distances of God’s good and fertile creation that at once provides for many and provides also for me. Bound by a holy and unbroken symbiosis I found body and soul, food and clothing, home and family and daily work all held together in the linguistic sphere of ‘thankfulness’.

Quickly the Lord’s Prayer followed and again the congregation recited, ***“Give us this day our daily bread.”***

And what is meant by daily bread?

“Everything required to satisfy our bodily needs, such as food and clothing, house and home, fields and flocks, money and property; a pious spouse and good children, trustworthy servants, and godly and faithful rulers, good government; seasonable weather, peace and health, order and honor; true friends, faithful neighbors and the like.” – Small Catechism, Explanation to the Fifth Petition.

I liked the idea of ‘a pious spouse and good children’ right away! But of course the teaching of Luther points more widely and deeply to the very foundations of human life and community. God has provisioned all of life. Soul and body are bound together in mortal life and God has provided for that binding so that with that binding all life might give back its praise and thanks to God.

My thoughts returned to my offering, held within the envelope I had placed in the offering plate unobtrusively placed on the altar by a quiet usher. I reflected on my offering differently now. Once I might have been tempted to think in comparative terms, my gift and God’s gift. Ridiculous! And you’re right.

This time my thoughts moved differently. I experienced my gift as an occasion to receive. My giving became itself an act of receiving. Receiving that which God had already provided – life itself and daily bread!

Now, when I recite the words, ‘With joy and THANKSGIVING. . .’ there is a different gestalt that I experience. ‘So how has your family – children and spouse – been an occasion for ‘thankfulness’ lately?’, I ask myself. ‘How is your ministry or vocation an avenue by which you express your ‘thankfulness’ to God?’ I have even thought that one could preach on ‘thankfulness’ every week and not run out of material even after a full life in ministry so great is the geography bounded by the single word - thankfulness.

And, that’s my point or question really. Where and how does ‘thankfulness’ take root in your life? And, what does it mean when you pray, “... we offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us ...”?