

“I will bless the Lord at all times, his praise shall ever be in my mouth.”

Today is the 2nd of 4 sermons on thankfulness.

Everything we do as Christians, together and separately,
EVERYTHING should begin and end with thanksgiving.

Last Sunday I talked about thanking God for life, for Creation.
Today’s topic is giving thanks to God for Salvation,
which means it’s time to talk about the Cross.

I want to give you 3 reasons why you should pause and give thanks to God,
every single day, for Jesus’ saving work on the cross.

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The first reason, the most important reason,
is that through Jesus’ self-offering on the cross,
you are saved from the final destruction of death.

One day during my first year of seminary,
a systematic theologian named Mark Richardson
spent an entire class talking to us about the properties of matter
and the conservation of energy.

To be honest I had trouble following his lecture,
but finally his point started to come into focus.

Dr. Richardson told us that the laws of matter and energy
meant there was neither any scientific evidence
nor any theoretical basis for life after death.

He said that every law of the universe pointed to one simple truth:
when you're dead, you're dead.

He said whatever you call an afterlife,
however you conceive of resurrection,
there is no way that heaven, or the resurrection of the body,
or eternal life is a part of the creation.
It is, literally, UN-natural.

And he said this was as true for Jesus of Nazareth
as it was for you and me. When you're dead, you're dead.

When those words came out of his mouth a silence fell over the classroom.

It seemed as if even the noise of the Manhattan traffic fell quiet.
Life after death, he said, is not part of the created order.
When you're dead, you're dead.

And then, as the class was ending, he said this:
IF THERE WERE something...anything...beyond the grave,
if there were any resurrection, any life after death,
it could not be because the universe was created that way.

It would have to be...a miracle.

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And right after Professor Richardson said those words
he walked over to the chapel, slipped on his priest's robes,
and celebrated Holy Eucharist.

He prayed the Great Thanksgiving.
He thanked God not just for the natural order of things,
but for the MIRACLE of our salvation.

WE gave thanks together that in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection,
God chose to violate the very laws of the universe he created,
the laws of matter and energy,
the power of death and the grave.

And God did it simply as an act of love.

So we give thanks for our salvation, we give thanks for the Cross,
because without it, when you're dead, you're dead.

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A second reason to give thanks for the cross
is that there seems to be very little else these days
that we can agree on.

I'm about to speak a little too much in generalities,
but please hear me out anyway.

There was a time in this country, and in our nation's churches,
when we had something close to a consensus about reality.

In that post-WWII world we argued about a lot of important things
but we at least had some kind of common language
about what we all wanted,
some kind of consensus about what words like truth,
equality, opportunity, and fairness meant.

That consensus no longer exists.

In our nation and in our nations churches,
we are no longer speaking the same language.

Again, I know I'm generalizing, but I think it's true.

In this internet age and this populist age
and now on the cusp of an artificial intelligence age,
our country is finding it harder and harder
to talk to one another because we can't even agree
on the meaning of the words we're using,
and our churches are in the same boat.
Christians in America seem trapped in this same division
that goes all the way down to our vocabulary.

So if our words can't unite us as Christians, what can?
What can hold us together as a church?

Maybe all we have right now...is the image of Christ on the cross.

"Where is the one who is wise?" he says.

"Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?...

For Jews demand signs and Greeks demand wisdom, but we...
we proclaim Christ crucified."

"May I never boast of anything," St. Paul says,
"except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."

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Friends, in both our nation and our churches we look an awful lot right now
like a man named Nicodemus.

We live in a time when the old ways don't seem to be sufficient
and the new ways don't seem to make sense.

And maybe the only way forward for us is the same as it was for Nicodemus.

We have to set our eyes on the cross.

“For just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,
so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

If you are having trouble right now talking to your fellow Christians,
if it seems like you can’t find any common ground with them
nor they with you,
whether it’s here at Holy Trinity, or out in the world,
or even at home with your families,
go back to the beginning. Go back to first principles.

Set your eyes firmly on the image of Christ crucified
and let that be your common ground. I tell you, it will be enough.

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One last reason for us to increase our thankfulness for the cross:
it’s because in the next few years we are going to have to
follow Jesus’ example in a particular way -
we are going to have to forgive one another.

And this is not about any one thing.

This is not about a president or a war or race or gender
or immigration or pronouns or any other thing that has divided us.

In a world without a common set of values,
the only way forward is going to be by showing
grace and mercy and forgiveness,
even to people who don’t seem to deserve it.

It’s easy to forgive somebody when they say they’re sorry.

It’s easy to forgive somebody when they say,

“You were right. I was wrong and you were right and I’m sorry.”

But that is not the future we're facing.

Are YOU prepared to walk across the divide in your world
and say that you were the one who was wrong? I'm not.

So we're either going to figure out how to forgive each other
and live together when we still disagree, when we are still divided,
or both our nation and our churches are going to
tear themselves apart and we'll just live in the ashes
of what could have been.

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Fleming Rutledge writes that we often misunderstand
the pattern of forgiveness. We think we're the driver of it.

I mess up. I realize it. I say I'm sorry,
and then then God comes in at the end to forgive me.

But the reality, she says, is that God's grace was there
before we ever repented,
that God's grace is there at the beginning
and is there all the way to the end.

She gives the example John Newton
who wrote Amazing Grace to give thanks to God
for saving him from his life as a slave trader.

John Newton says he didn't come to the truth on his own.
No, it was God's amazing grace that was there at the beginning -
loving him, guiding him until he could see
the terrible truth of what he was doing.

God's grace loved him before he repented and made him new after it,
and we are going to have to emulate that same pattern of grace -
to love our enemies long before we come around
to any kind of agreement.

Jesus gave himself up on the cross to save
the very people who were shouting for him to be crucified,
to save the very people who ran away when he was arrested.

He died on the cross to save them from their sins
not because they saw that he was right,
but because he was committed to loving them anyway.

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St. Paul puts it this way:

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself....

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death--
even death on a cross.”

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Friends, our liturgies, our scriptures, our theologies, our creeds,
our catechisms, our HYMNS, all of the OFFICIAL words of our faith
tell us to be filled with thanksgiving
for the saving power of the cross,
for Jesus Christ crucified and risen for you.

All that remains are for the words of YOUR lips,
the words of YOUR heart, to echo the words of our church.

**“We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you,
because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.”**

Amen.