

From Dumpster Fire to a Fire of Thanksgiving

“From Dumpster Fire to a Fire of Thanksgiving” is my title. Several times I’ve heard commercials, talk show hosts, Hollywood personalities refer to 2020 as a ‘dumpster fire.’ The LA law program I listen to as a podcast declared in April 2020, “Well it’s good that things are starting to get back to normal.” Nope, the dumpster’s still burning, and how do we get from it to Thanksgiving? From a dumpster fire to a fire of thanks. Luther is good here. He says things like “one who does not see such [invisible] things, but sees only the present, cannot praise God except in good times” (LW, 10, 398). And, learn to trust God for some other reason than you have enough, are satisfied, and your belly is well provided for. “Trust based on that is not trust in God but rather in wealth and gifts which have been received” (LW, 9, 95). Finally, “Let no one...imagine himself to have a favorable God because He showers him with good” (Ibid., 297). Luther’s looks at the dumpster fire and still says thanks. How? Say grace before thanks.

We say, “Let’s say grace,” or ask our kid, “Did you say grace?” We all know that refers to the prayer before the meal where we ask God to bless this food to our nourishment and health. We’re all under the mistaken impression that if the FDA says something is nutritious and healthful, it automatically is to us. If it’s in the proper place in the nutrition pyramid were good. Nope. To paraphrase Ps. 127, “Unless the Lord blesses the food, it’s useless for you to watch your diet.” As a 19th century work on the Catechism says, “He who goes to the table without prayer goes away without the blessing of God and his meat and drink may prove the means of his death... [H]ad he sanctified them with prayer, they would have ministered to the support of his bodily life.” (*Narratives Catechism*, III, 77). Luther said when you say, “Bless us and Your gifts,” as a table prayer, the blessing was sought not only for the person, but for the food as well. Make them useful to God to work in us (Peters, *Confes. & Abs*, 249-50).

Say grace. Our text says ‘grace’ five times. Look at your insert: V. 13 has “forgiving each other” and “as the Lord forgave you”. Forgive in both cases are forms of the verb *charizomai*. Then in v. 15 we have “be thankful”. That’s the Greek *eucharistos*, an adjective from *charizomai*. Then in V. 17 we have “whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks.” First, this isn’t a command but modifies how we are to do everything. Second, “giving thanks” is again the verb *eucharisteō*. Then look back at 16. It describes worshipping “with gratitude in your heart toward God.” “Gratitude” is the noun *charis*. And it has the article *tē charis*. It’s *the* grace described in the preceding and the following verses. “Say grace” indeed.

“Gracing” first means “forgiving” in our text and then it means thanking. Our gracing of one another is based on what the Lord has done for us. We are to forgive, we are to *charizomai*, we are to grace “just as the Lord forgave, literally graced, us.” How did the Lord forgive? Did He say, “Repent, change, do better, then I’ll forgive you”? Or, “Be sorry more, be sorry enough, then I’ll forgive you”? What does Romans 5 say? In vs. 8 it’s, “While we were *still sinners*, Christ died for us.” And as if that weren’t far enough over the moon, vs. 10 says, “while we were God’s *enemies*, we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son.” Really, vs. 8 and 10 are trying to help us wrap our hearts around the astounding vs. 6 which says, “at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the *ungodly*.”

We in fact we’re unforgivable when God in Christ forgave us. When we speak of forgiving, gracing each other just as the Lord did us, all talk of the person deserving it, being sorry, making up for their sins, repaying us can’t be in view. God in Christ didn’t look at us but at His Son who was holy and perfect in every way. And when the subject of our justly deserved temporal and eternal punishment came up, the object was the holy, perfect Son. And God poured out all His wrath, all His hatred of sin, all of His anger on Him once and for all. Such grace, such forgiveness is world wide, and leads to the Lord providing for the world. He says He sends His rain on the just and unjust; He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good (Mt. 5:45). This is part of our official Confession: “God certainly gives daily bread to everyone without our prayers *even to all evil people*.” And in our Explanation to the 1st Article of the Creed we say our thanksgiving comes from His forgiving or gracing as Paul calls it: “All this [God’s providing and protecting] He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise...Him”.

This illustrates “Say grace before thanks”, but it’s too soon to go there. We can go one better. Vs. 13 could be translated, “Forbearing one another and forgiving yourself.” Don’t “go down the garden path” of “you need to forgive yourself before you can forgive anyone else” or worse, “before God can forgive you.” There’s entirely too much of you in “forgive yourself.” But because it can indeed be translated as “forgiving” or “gracing yourself” and then immediately says “just as the Lord forgave, or graced, you”, the Lord is emphatic about His grace and forgiveness toward you. It’s far more than the Devil, the World, or your Flesh can imagine. We’ve watched the dumpster fire of the world burn for over a year and a half. Now look at the warm, cheering fire where your sins were burned up.

We could stop here, but there’s more to saying grace before thanks. The practice of returning thanks at the end of the a meal is a good practice to be restored. We did it in devotions after supper. Some folks combine the grace with the thanks, saying thanks immediately following grace. The point remains: grace before thanks. You know how I like the warp drive image from sci-fi? Here in this text we jump from grace to thanks and then jump to a whole nother level. Namely the Lord’s Supper. Ps. 116 connects gratitude and receiving the cup of salvation:

“How can I repay the Lord for all His goodness to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord.” The verb *eucharisteō*, thanksgiving of our text is also found in connection with the Lord’s Supper in Matthew, Mark, Luke and St. Paul.

That’s a warp jump from a thankful, grace filled, forgiven heart today to the Lord’s Supper 2000 years earlier. Now make the leap forward with Buzz Lightyear: to infinity and beyond. We’ll start doing this when Advent begins Sunday. We’ll say as part of the Thanksgiving, 1 Cor. 11:26: “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.” The Day of Thanks we celebrate today reaches back to the Body and Blood Jesus gave and shed for us before the Father in Eternity and on a Friday we call Good and forward till time and space are swallowed up by eternity and beyond. And all this is rooted in the Divine Service.

Look at the text. Paul sees the giving of thanks, the *eucharisteō* as taking place in the Divine Service. “Be thankful” is immediately followed by go to church. Vs.15 ends, with “and be thankful” and then vs. 16 says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude, literally with ‘the grace’, in your hearts to God.” Where on earth but here do we teach and admonish each other with psalms, hymns, and spirituals songs? And this takes place says Paul with “the grace” in your hearts. There’s a fire of grace, forgiveness, and thanksgiving lit here by God for sinners such as us. From in here we can’t see or even smell the dystopian dumpster fire lit by those who thumb their noses at God’s Word about Life, Marriage, Sin and grace. But Paul has got still more.

There’s an ‘all’ connected to your *eucharisteō*, to your thanksgiving in vs. 17. And the literal Greek really shows you how all encompassing it is. “And *all* things *whatever* you should do in word or in work, *always* in the name of the Lord Jesus, *eucharisteō* to God the Father through Him.” As I said earlier, “do” is the main verb. *Eucharisteō* is the participle, i.e. thanksgiving is not the main verb. But it’s a present tense participle meaning it’s always going on with all, with whatever, with always what you do. Holy Communion is called the *Eucharist* based on the thanksgiving that breaks forth from sinners who sins have been forgiven, who have been fed body and soul by the Body and the Blood of their God. The point in vs. 17 is the Body and Blood of Jesus you eat and drink here, always goes with you out there - among dumpster fires and all. His Person and Work here lights a fire of grace, of thanks, of forgiveness that burns all the time wherever you go.

But if all you can see and smell is the dumpster fires of this fallen world, a passing away thing is eclipsing an eternal thing. Solomon says this rather over the top thing: “God has also put eternity in their hearts.” You can feel that, can’t you? You’ve been created for more this. Even the times in your life when there are no dumpsters burning, you can dream, see, sense something beyond this space and time, something more. You glimpse it in the Baptismal font that washes to the point of a rebirthing and regenerating by the Holy Spirit a totally new creation. You sense it as you eat the Body of God as Bread and drink the Blood of God as Wine that you’ve been reborn for better things than these. Indeed, since God says in Ecc. 3:11 that He has set eternity in our hearts, don’t let anything in time eclipse eternity. But before He tells us that He has set eternity in our hearts He says, “He has made everything beautiful in its time.”

With glad confidence in this, we can say thanks even when all we see are dumpster fires. Indeed, it is at these times we can know that our thanks is born from God rather than from things, from beyond this world not from this world, and that out of His grace has come our thanks. Amen

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