Luke 23:33-43 The Spirit of Gratitude
Colossians 1:9-20
November 23, 2025

Happy Thanksgiving! In the church year scheme of things, this Sunday is the last of what is sometimes blandly called, “regular time,” or, “the time after Pentecost,” which means, “life in the Spirit.” It is meant to address all the different features of the spiritual life. It is the last Sunday of the church year for those who try, at least in small ways, to follow the calendar of the church beyond the celebration of Christmas and Easter.

When the various expressions of the faith, Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant, that developed these traditions, put together the emphases for the end of the year, there was no annual Thanksgiving tradition to take up time or space in the mind’s of the faithful. They concentrated on Christ’s return. This Sunday is a hybrid between the national holiday and the last Sunday of the church year.

The gospel reading stands out to me because it harkens back to the Passion. In it we find Jesus on the cross, and it is Luke’s version of the story. There are two of the last seven, words of Christ;

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,” and, “Today, you will be with me in Paradise,” spoken to one of the thieves with whom Jesus was executed.

Rather than a focus, such as last week, on biblical statements and images of Christ’s Return, or the Great Judgment, or the Consummation of the Age, one is directed back to the great sacrifice at the crucifixion, with two ideas to contemplate; forgiveness and resurrection. In the spirit of gratitude, which is suggested to us by the national holiday, and also countless scriptures, let us linger for awhile in these sentiments; mercy and the promise of heaven.

When it comes to forgiveness, the emphasis on the Passion narrative in Luke differs from the telling of parables involving mercy, or the command of the Lord’s Prayer, “forgive us our sins, and we forgive our debtors.”

Here, Jesus is not instructing the followers towards forgiveness, seen as a logical or rhetorical ploy that since we *have been* forgiven, we ought also to forgive. Rather, we catch Jesus in the act, red-handed so to speak, with his hands in the cookie jar, of forgiving others.

And here, there is not a sense that the offenders have repented; that they have acknowledged their wrong-doing, stopped doing it, and apologized, committing themselves to making it right. Jesus forgives his murderers as they are in the act, caught red-handed, so to speak, of murdering him.

I am reminded of the great verse from the 5th chapter of Romans in which Paul writes, “God demonstrates

his love for us in this, *that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."*

There is an expression from the English poet Alexander Pope with which I am sure you are all familiar, "To err is human, to forgive divine." *There is no more clear an example of divinity than this description of Jesus from the cross.*

We marvel not only because this event pictures one human being showing mercy to another, but because we understand it as a kind of prevenient mercy, given while the offenses are yet occurring, and believe it to be God extending mercy to us, though we are undeserving, for which we are grateful.

We are encouraged to include it in our Thanksgiving considerations, in addition to God's provision for our basic needs, the harvest side of things - but also for the meeting of our deepest spiritual needs, to receive the nourishment of mercy given, and the possibility of mercy received.

The second of the last words of Jesus from the cross that appear in today's reading comes from the interaction between Jesus and the two thieves. The promise of paradise given to the, "good," thief has been used as a justification for the belief that immediately upon death the deceased believer goes to heaven; as opposed to the idea of falling asleep until the general resurrection of the dead.

But there is the challenging notion as well, that in the interaction, Jesus promises *an evildoer* who is not innocent of his crimes as is Jesus; and who seems to come to his faith at the very end of earthly life when there is nothing he can do to right his wrongs; that *he too is forgiven,* benefitting from divine mercy. We give attention to the promise of paradise, and respond in the only appropriate way, in humble gratitude.

It is clear in the message of the New Testament, especially in Paul's letters, but also in the gospels and other places, an emphasis on salvation as the forgiveness of Sin and the resurrection hope, which address two of the great threats to humanity, the threat of moral failure, and that of mortality.

In order for this particular way of understanding the meaning of salvation, thus the meaning of our lives, one is greatly aided by an acknowledgment of sin in its various manifestations: pride and arrogance, undue selfishness, transgression (the crossing of boundaries) disobedience . . . the mistaken belief that we are somehow adequate to achieve our own salvation, in actuality doing away with the need for Christ's sacrifice.

Yet a genuine and humble acceptance of our sinfulness, one that leads to repentance and the acceptance of God's grace, which is the meaning of faith, has always been foreign to the zeitgeist; against the spirit of the age. I guess one can say that it is an offense, generally, against human self-esteem founded

upon some kind of achievement or inherent goodness, rather than upon God's love and forgiveness.

It is characteristic of the human self-understanding either to proclaim innocence or seek vindication for our failures. Such a purpose is a burdensome struggle. It must be carried out all day, all throughout life. It is better to be forgiven than vindicated, regardless of the spirit of the age; the spirit of every age.

The burden itself has been lifted by God's gracious gift in Christ Jesus. It makes sense, then, on this last Sunday, to return to the cross, where God's purposes in Christ are played out most clearly. And which is also the Sunday just before the Thursday set aside to focus on gratitude, the rightest response. We seek to make sure that we add these to the list of all that for which we are thankful.

So among all we say and do this week, and on Thursday, with gathered friends and family, football games and feasts, and dare I say it, Christmas shopping, remember as well, and let it be an assignment for us this week, to hear these words, and take them into our minds and hearts, and let them nourish our souls;

" . . . Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing," and, " . . . today you will be with me in paradise." And let this spirit of gratitude be the context in which Advent is observed, and the birth of Jesus is celebrated.

Mark 7:24-30

24 Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of
Tyre.[a] He entered a house and did not want anyone
to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret.
25 In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman
whose little daughter was possessed by an impure
spirit came and fell at his feet. 26 The woman was a
Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to
drive the demon out of her daughter.
27 “First let the children eat all they want,” he told her,
“for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss
it to the dogs.”
28 “Lord,” she replied, “even the dogs under the table
eat the children’s crumbs.”
29 Then he told her, “For such a reply, you may go; the
demon has left your daughter.”
30 She went home and found her child lying on the
bed, and the demon gone.

Matthew 15:21-28

21 Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of
Tyre and Sidon. 22 A Canaanite woman from that
vicinity came to him, crying out, “Lord, Son of David,
have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed
and suffering terribly.”
23 Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples
came to him and urged him, “Send her away, for she
keeps crying out after us.”
24 He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of
Israel.”
25 The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help
me!” she said.
26 He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s
bread and toss it to the dogs.”
27 “Yes it is, Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the
crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”
28 Then Jesus said to her, “Woman, you have great
faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was
healed at that moment.

Aquinas -

Humility
Patience
Prayer for Mercy
Perseverance
Faith

Mark has Syro- Phoenician
Matthew has Canaanite - an obsolete word in the time of Jesus which highlights the status of his woman as an adversary.

Justa and Berenice

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