Sermon for November 24, 2011 - Thanksgiving

Psalm 136

Theme: Give Thanks To The Lord.

1) For He is good
2) For His mercy is forever.

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good. His love endures forever. 2 Give thanks to the God of gods. His love endures forever. 3 Give thanks to the Lord of lords: His love endures forever. 4 To him who alone does great wonders, His love endures forever. 5 Who by his understanding made the heavens, His love endures forever. 6 Who spread out the earth upon the waters, His love endures forever. . . . 23 To the One who remembered us in our low estate His love endures forever. 24 And freed us from our enemies, His love endures forever. 25 And who gives food to every creature. His love endures forever. 26 Give thanks to the God of heaven. His love endures forever.

Charles Dickens said that we are somewhat mixed up here in America. Instead of having a day of thanksgiving, he suggests: “Use that one day just for complaining and griping. Use the other 364 days to thank God each day for the many blessings He has showered upon you.”

He has a good point. Thanksgiving should not be the only time we thank God, we ought to do it all the time. This is why many Christians pray before or after they eat: “O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good. His mercy endures forever.”

Have you ever considered how many times you prayed that prayer in your life? I was raised to pray that prayer at every meal. A conservative estimate indicates that I have prayed that prayer at least 32,000 times in my short life time. God considered this prayer so important that he had it written in 4 different Psalms (106, 107, 118 and 136).

Even though I prayed this prayer some 32,000 times in my life, the sad part is that even though the words were on my lips, their meaning was many times far from my heart. How often have we prayed this prayer only to start complaining right after we were done about how someone treated us rotten, or how horrible our lot in life is? How often haven’t we mindlessly spoken those words as if they were some mantra, or just part of what Lutherans traditionally do after every meal? What do we think about when we are done praying these words or do we think at all?

Over 32000 times I have prayed “O give thanks to the LORD,” but I would be ashamed to know how many times I actually prayed it with a right heart.

This is why it is good to take some time – a day out of the year – to really remind ourselves of the good God has shown us, the love and mercy behind that goodness, and to thank him for it. And we do this not merely to thank him this one day of the year, but to be invigorated to thank him daily – meditating on all his goodness every time we give thanks.

And so, with Psalm 136:1 as our guide, let us “Give thanks to the LORD” Why? 1) Because he is good. 2) Because his mercy endures forever.

Part One: Because He is good

Psalm 136 is a beautiful psalm of thanks. It was originally sung at the great harvest festival of Pentecost in Jerusalem and reminded the Israelites to be thankful before their God. Why? Because of everything the LORD had done for them, because of his creation, his providence and how wonderfully he delivered them from Egypt.
to the Promised Land. Every sentence of this Psalm recalled God’s goodness to Israel. And after every statement the congregation would sing: *for his love endures forever.* 26 times this refrain is found in Psalm 136, and the number 26 is symbolic of the LORD’s name: “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.” (Exodus 34:6-7). This beautiful Psalm impressed on all the Israelites gathered to celebrate Pentecost that everything LORD does is good. Everything He does is a reflection of His love for them.

We have gathered together this morning to give thanks to the LORD, as the Israelites did of old. What does it mean to give thanks? The word thank is related to the word think. To give thanks means to think in appreciation about what God has done for you.

It is good for us to think about everything God has done for us, not only so that we can be thankful, but also to find a strengthening of faith as we face the uncertainties of the future.

The first verse of our Psalm says:” Give thanks to the LORD for he is good. Everything God does is good and for the good of those He loves. What good things has he done? First of all he created and sustains this whole earth. The good acts of God are seen in the beautiful sunrises and sunsets he allows us to enjoy. The goodness of God is seen in the forest, meadows and mountains he placed on this earth. Spectacular and breathtaking beauty is everywhere. And he creates these things for us to enjoy.

The goodness of God is also seen in how he preserves his creation: how he feeds every animal and gives it what it needs. The goodness of God is seen in how we have air, water, shelter, and food to sustain our lives – and not only enough to sustain, but also more enough for us to find at least some pleasure and happiness in life. The goodness of God is seen throughout His creation.

I once had an atheist challenge me on this point. He said, “But I also see evil in creation. I see competition, pain, pollution, disease and death. How is God good if these too are in creation?” My response was this: “What you see is not what God created, but what sinful man has corrupted. Pollution, crime, war – this is all what man is doing, not God. Pain, disease, death and catastrophe – these, the Bible says, are results of sin. Evil is not a part of God’s creation, it stems from man’s corruption of God’s creation.”

And this again speaks to the goodness of God. Even though man thoroughly corrupted his creation with sin and evil, God still is good to man. In love, he determined to save mankind by providing a Savior: Jesus Christ. God’s goodness went so far as to tolerate man’s sinfulness so that, in time, he could save mankind from it. Jesus lived the good life we did not. He did the good act of taking our sins upon himself and dying on the cross. He rose again to show us that he paid for all our sins, that we are now reconciled to God.

God was good to us by causing us to believe the message of the Gospel for the salvation of our souls. He delivered us from death and has given us the sure hope of eternal life with himself.

God protects us from so many different evils. If we were to worry about every airborne illness or potential for disease or accident, we would lose our minds. But God is continually protecting us from all these things. However, even when they do enter our life, when disaster strikes, God’s Word reminds us that He has not failed, but rather to trust that He has allowed even the evil we experience to serve for our good – for our training in righteousness. In Romans 8 God gives this promise: *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.* (Romans 8:28)  He reassures us: 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of
God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35, 36-39) He comforts us with the fact that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. (Romans 8:18)

Yes, it is proper and right for us to give thanks to the LORD – to ponder in appreciation on all the LORD has done and continues to do for us. And when we do this in the light of Scripture, we see that everything God does is good. But why? Why is God so good to us when we are not good to him? Why does God so wonderfully create, preserve, save, deliver and exalt us? It’s because his love endures forever.

Part Two: His love endures forever

26 times this phrase is repeated in this Psalm. Everything the LORD has done and continues to do stems from his love towards us. What is his love, and why does it endure forever? This love is a decision God made to love us well before we were born, before the creation of the world.

God is not stupid. He did not create this world ignorant of the fact that man would fall into sin. He was not suddenly surprised when it happened. No, before he called a speck of the created world into existence, God knew that mankind would rebel against him. But then, why did God create us? Did he want it to happen? No, God did not want it to happen anymore than parents want their children to rebel against them during their teenage years. But God knew this was going to happen and still decided to love us. Instead of just not creating us, instead of just damning all of creation to hell after man sinned, God chose to save us. God the Father created man with the knowledge that he would have to sacrifice his Son—the one he loves above all else—in order to save us. And do you know what else? God the Son, from before the creation of the world, agreed with His Father’s plan—He agreed to suffer for us.

God’s saving love for us in Christ was planned before time and executed in time, so that the results may linger beyond time and we might enjoy the presence of God’s love forever.

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good. His love endures forever. This thanksgiving, remember what this means. Remember all the material blessings you have. Yes, praise God that you can turn on a tap and get fresh water whenever you want. Did you know that over 50% of the world’s population does not have this blessing! More importantly, however, thank God for the precious water of baptism that was poured out upon you. Thank God for having brought you to faith in Jesus and washed you clean from all sin. Remember how he safely brought you through every trial of the past, and gives you the hope of heaven. Yes, remember God’s goodness to you, and be strengthened in the knowledge that God loves you so dearly. Praise him for this love every time you pray “O Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good. His love endures forever!” If you pray this prayer at every meal like I do, you will have approximately 1095 times this year to thank God with this prayer. Yes, everyday certainly is a day of thanksgiving. Amen.