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WHAT THANKS ARE YOU GIVING?

by Tom Bracken

The sermon title is pretty straightforward, right? I'm not asking the question regarding money (at least not this year!). And it's not judgmental - you know, "what thanks are *YOU* giving?" It's just a simple question at the start of Thanksgiving week, devoid of any deeper meaning. I couldn't even do a sermon on it. Okay, well maybe I can come up with *something*...

As I prayed about this, the more I thought about the word "thanks", the more interpretations seemed to pop into my head. In fact, I discovered a hierarchy - no, make that hierarchies - of thanks that I never considered before. Let's explore the word by exploring God's Word.

The first hierarchy is the type of thanks, and I came up with six levels. The first is "sarcastic" thanks - someone bumps into you on the sidewalk, or cuts you off on the road, and you say "thanks". That's not what I say, but what I say doesn't really sound good in a sermon. The second thanks is when you receive a tie for the 9th father's day in a row, or when you get back the especially ugly gift you gave someone last Christmas. I call that "stoic" thanks. But these first two aren't really thanks, they're human-but-fake, so we're done with them.

The next two are human-but-genuine. The third is "expected" thanks, like when you ask for a particular birthday gift, and you get what you asked for. It's genuine, but maybe not as heartfelt as #4, "unexpected" thanks. That's everything from a stranger holding the door for you, to coming in from a long hard day and finding out that your honey has made you some hot tea and wants to give you a neck massage. There's joy in the surprise, and in knowing you're special to another human being.

The last two are from our Lord- about time, right? And trust me, the rest of this sermon is all about our Lord. Number 5. It's your church gathering around you when you lose a loved one; a hug from a friend who knows you're just about over the edge. It's that feeling when the parent with Alzheimer's remembers your name, when the choir is carried away on the wings of the Spirit, or the warmth in your chest when your child says "I love you". These things, and so many more, are #5, God's love through others.

If the first hierarchy is that of type, the second is the nature of thanks. There are only two of these - thank goodness, right? - and they are "relief" and "belief". Relief is about the past: getting a bonus when you didn't know whether you could pay the bills; your plane landed safely in a bad storm; your missing child called two hours late to say he was eating at his friend's house; or maybe even "Tom's sermon is finally over" (sorry, not even close, we're just getting to the good part!).

If relief is about the past, then belief is about the present and the future. You thought I forgot about type #6 before, didn't you? One time last year, Kathie and I were bringing our little sailboat back to port, up the Carman's river. It had been a beautiful day of sailing, and as we headed in from the Great South Bay, we looked at each other simultaneously, smiled, and said

“this is perfect”. The Holy Spirit engulfed us, and the peace was indescribable. It WAS perfect. This is the present, this is living in the moment with Jesus Christ, and I call #6 “God’s Love - straight up”.

And belief, as it applies to the future? Trusting in our Lord, having and keeping our faith no matter what. We experience it during the prayers of the people; when we read our Bibles; when we ask God’s blessings and mercy; when we do our best, however imperfectly, to walk as Jesus walked. This is all giving thanks. Consider the following extracts from an actual Thanksgiving proclamation, and listen to the true thanks that flow from the issuer:

Once again the season of the year has come ... to give praise and thanksgiving to God... Much has been given us from on high, and much will rightly be expected of us in return. Into our care the ten talents have been entrusted; and we are to be pardoned neither if we squander and waste them, nor yet if we hide them in a napkin; for they must be fruitful in our hands. Ever throughout the ages, at all times and among all peoples, prosperity has been fraught with danger, and it behooves us to beseech the Giver of all things that we may not... lose our sense of moral responsibility; that we may not forget our duty to God, and to our neighbor.

Now, Therefore, I... do set apart Thursday..., as a day for general Thanksgiving and Prayer, and on that day I recommend that the people shall cease from their daily work, and in their homes or in their churches, meet devoutly to thank the Almighty for the many and great blessings they have received in the past, and to pray that they may be given the strength so to order their lives as to deserve a continuation of these blessings in the future.

So, who wrote this? What public figure was willing to give thanks and glory to the Living God like this? President Obama? Hillary Clinton? Donald Trump?

*Done at the city of Washington, this the 26th day of October in the year of our Lord, 1907.
[signed] Theodore Roosevelt, President of the United States of America*

My final hierarchy is also made up of two parts; really, only one part. To Whom are we thankful, and of course there are only two options: people, and God. Care to hazard a guess as to which one I’m going to discuss?

This is the final Sunday of the liturgical year. It is known as Reign of Christ Sunday. How fitting for us to talk about giving thanks to our King! And yet, how can we imperfect humans thank our Lord as presented by Daniel in our first reading: [Daniel 7:13-14]. What can we offer to the Christ, and God, of our second reading: [Revelation 1:7-8]. And how can we even begin to appreciate the humility of Jesus, when he responds to Pilate: [John 18:37b]. In short: how do we thank a God who has - and is - everything?

The Jews offered sacrifices to honor God - but was God really honored? The Crusaders fought wars to protect God - but did God really need protecting? You and I join in fellowship and outreach, read the Bible, and pray, in order to know God’s will for us - but is that the thanks God really wants from all us? Actually, I believe that’s *exactly* the thanks God wants. Listen to Matthew 25:37-40. [*] Sounds like a King who has heard his people’s thanks by their fellowship and outreach. How about Acts 5:42 for a Bible study? [*] And for prayer, consider Matthew 6:9-13, although you might not have to research this one too far...

And yet, we’re still hitting all around the mark. What thanks can we give God? Has God already given us the key to his heart? As a matter of fact, I believe he has. You can find it in the Minor Prophets, in the back of the Old Testament, in the book of Micah. It’s in the second

half of a single verse, believe it or not. But I'll need some help to get there: [Micah 6:6a Mark, 6:6b Margie, 6:7a Kent, 6:7b Lynn, 6:8a Scott, **6:8b**] **To act justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.**

To act justly: Daniel 7:10 - "The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened". Not to judge God; to judge us.

To love mercy: Revelation 1:5 - "Him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood".

To walk humbly with our God: John 18:37 - "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice".

Four days from now, let us recommit ourselves to serve our King by serving others; let us pray about how we can touch someone else with the love of Jesus Christ; and let us celebrate Thanksgiving by giving thanks to the One who loves us more than anything else in this world.

Amen.