

“NOW THANK WE ALL OUR GOD.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Psalm 148

Prayer: Holy Father, may you be glorified, may your Son be exalted, may your Word be faithfully proclaimed and your people edified. To the spiritually dull and uninterested open their hearts and ears. To the distracted and hurting give manna from heaven. May we all be able to say it was good to be in the house of the Lord together. Come, Holy Spirit. Amen.

Introduction.

There are two kinds of people with it comes to paying taxes. Those who just take the standard deduction and those who itemize their deductions.

There are two kinds of Christians when it comes to confessing their sins, those who just pray a blanket prayer, “Father, forgive all my sins” and those who itemize their sins, confessing them by name, being specific.

There are two kinds of Christians when it comes to giving thanks. Those who just pray a blanket prayer of thanksgiving, “Dear God, thank you for everything, we are so blessed” and those who itemize their thanksgiving.

The more Biblical way of giving thanks is to itemize, to be intentional, to be thoughtful, to take time to actually think about all we have been blessed with and all we are thankful for. A grateful heart wants to itemize.

We started our worship this morning with a hymn based on Psalm 150 that is an itemized list of ways and reasons for giving praise and thanks.

Like the lover, “how do I love thee, let me count the ways,” so it ought to be with the lover of God.

Itemizing our Thanksgiving – Psalm 148.

Psalm 148 gives us a terrific example of an itemized prayer list for giving praise and thanks to God. He moves through every aspect of life.

Everyone and everything in this list *should praise* and give thanks to God, and everything in this list *is cause* for our giving thanks to God.

This is a universal call to all creation, animate and inanimate, to be united in one thing, giving praise and thanks to their creator.

This Psalm lights up the whole universe in praise. It starts in the highest heavens, sweeps down to earth, to the depths of the earth and then back up to the redeemed saints nearest to the heart of God.

The Psalm has two parts. The first part, verses 1-6, calls the upper creation, the heavens to give praise to God and this part ends with a reason in verses 5-6. The second part, verses 7-14, calls the lower creation, the earth, to give praise to God and this part also ends with a reason in verses 13-14.

In Scripture there are three heavens, the realm of the angels, the realm of the stars and the realm of the birds. The Psalmist starts in the third heaven, the heaven of heavens, the holy of holies, and works his way down the list.

Everything in the heavenly places, angels, archangels, cherubim and seraphim, thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. Heaven is a vast realm of praise and worship we can't begin to imagine, but filled with fellow worshippers and cause for thanks.

Everything in the cosmic heavens, the sun, moon and stars, Sirius, Vega, Polaris, Cassiopeia, Orion, and Tarsus. A choir as vast as the angels if not more so, solar giants, galaxies and super nova, who praise by being what they are and reflecting God's creative power and glory. They are our fellow worshippers and praisers of God.

As vast and huge and numerous as they are, God spoke each of them into existence with a word, He gave them their power and glory, He assigned them their place, and named them. They bow to His authority. He continues to uphold them and they will persevere only as long as He says.

I look up at a night sky and say, "God, look at what you have done, look at the vastness, look at the beauty, the heavens are cause to worship you, and they do worship you, their maker. They are cause for giving thanks for they reveal you and your glory."

Pagans worship creation, Christians worship the Creator of creation. Nothing in creation is to be worshipped and praised, everything in creation is cause to worship and praise the Creator.

How does everything in creation praise God? By doing what it was created to do, by fulfilling its God-glorifying purpose. The heavenly bodies praise and give thanks simply because they exist.

The angels praise God with pure and everlasting worship, and by doing God's bidding. God commands His angels on our behalf. Angels should be on all our lists.

The sun praises God by rising every morning and giving warmth to the earth.

The moon praises God by rising every evening, reflecting the sun's light and controlling the tides.

The stars praise God by their shining glory, faithfully following their course and adorning the heavens.

Everything praises God by doing what it was created to do.

Next the Psalmist comes down to earth. Sea creatures and all that inhabit the depths, whales and walruses, salmon and stingrays. Notice what he says about the weather, fire, hail, snow, wind, thunder and lightning, they fulfill the Word of God. They obey His secret command. The seasons are His messengers and servants. God commands and controls everything.

Then the mountains from the Himalayas to the Cascades, hills and valleys, meaning all the earth.

Trees from towering cedars to the rose bush, meaning all vegetation. Trees praise God by producing oxygen and absorbing carbon dioxide and giving shade and becoming houses and buildings and paper and books.

Beasts and livestock, meaning all wild and domesticated creatures. Dairy cows praise God by giving milk for milk and cheese and ice cream. Do you realize we wouldn't be here if it weren't for dairy cows? This church wouldn't be here.

Creeping insects and reptiles, flying birds, everything with wings, canaries, blue jays and bats. Everything that has breath.

The list of created things on earth reaches its pinnacle with mankind, the crown of creation, those given the power of reason and understanding, and a way to give voice to their thanks.

Every person everywhere, from kings and princes and rulers, to young men and women, the old and even children. "Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise" (Matthew 21:16). All people without regard to status or station, age or sex are called to glorify God their Creator with praise and thanks. The weak and strong, the poor and rich.

Those in high places being especially blessed ought to lead the way in this business of giving thanks and praise to God. And old people who have had the most experience in receiving the gifts of God ought also to lead the way. It is a life-long calling from which we never retire.

Finally, there is one group in creation that should exceed them all, even the angels.

God's own people, the saints, the covenant people of God. Especially those who know the salvation of the Son, those who are near to the heart of God, especially must give praise and thanks.

Israel was elevated above every nation, having the covenants and prophets, the adoption and glory, and the new Israel, the church, is elevated above every other earthly institution or association. The church is the apple of God's eye, the nearest and dearest thing to His heart.

Our praise and worship and thanks should far exceed the angels in glory, because we have received a gift they have not. They marvel when they look on the earth and see what it is Jesus came down to do. Remember Zachariah's prophecy at the birth of John the Baptist:

Luke 1:68-69 Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.

Nothing in all of creation is as blessed as we are, so no one or nothing in all creation should give more thanks. We don't give thanks just because we exist, we give thanks because we know God's redemptive love and His redemptive work on the cross.

It is shameful for inanimate objects and weather systems and unconscious animals to praise God by being and doing what they were created to do and we don't. To whom so much has been given and to whom so much has been revealed, much is expected and required.

It is good to itemize our thanks and it is good to sing our thanks.

Singing our Thanksgiving – Now Thank We All Our God.

The story behind this much loved Thanksgiving hymn will inspire us to give thanks more. It was written by Martin Rinkart. Martin started out teaching high school in Eilenberg, Germany, but through his church involvement eventually became a pastor. In the hard providence of God his ministry coincided with The Thirty Years' War.

The Thirty Years' War, 1618-1648, was one of history's longest and most terrible wars. Warring Catholics and Protestants from all over Europe used Germany as the battleground. The suffering from that war is beyond description. It reduced Germany's population from 16 to 8 million.

Eilenberg was a walled city and it became a refuge from the war. The overcrowding brought famine, unsanitary conditions and plague. Many pastors fled or died, leaving Martin Rinkart alone to care for the dead, sometimes performing 40 to 50 funerals a day. By the time it was over he had done almost 4,500 including his own wife who died of starvation and disease. We can't begin to imagine the mental, emotional, spiritual and physical toll this took. Worn

out from fatigue and stress and emotional exhaustion he died a year after the war ended at the age of 63.

In the midst of this and perhaps for the sanity of his soul he wrote over sixty hymns, one of which has had almost universal appreciation in Germany and English speaking countries, Now Thank We All Our God, written in 1630.

Since meal time is often the most common time we pause to give thanks and remember God's grace and provision and protection, Martin wrote this hymn to be a short prayer of grace before meals.

There are hints of the Thirty Years' War in the second stanza, but the tone is one of heart felt gratitude to God for His greatness, goodness, and generosity.

Just as Psalm 148 itemizes reasons for giving praise and thanks, this hymn doesn't just say thank God, it gives reasons to do so.

The first stanza tells us how to give thanks and then five reasons why, looking back with gratitude to the provision and providence of God. The second stanza looks with hope to the future, a hope based on God's already proven faithfulness. Notice what the pray asks for? Two of God's richest gifts, better than anything money can buy, the blessing of His presence and peace.

The third stanza ends in a crescendo of praise to our triune God.

We are reminded that because of who God is and what He has already done for us, we can always give thanks in the midst of trial, praise in the midst of our problems, and doxologies in the midst of our difficulties.

The stark contrast between the thankful spirit of this hymn and the painful reality of the author's life is a wonderful testament to his unwavering faith. One of the most loved hymns of Thanksgiving came out of one of history's darkest and greatest times of suffering.

Most of us have experienced similar contrasts in life. But as we grow in Christian faith, we learn that God's grace is sufficient in all things. We are exhorted to be thankful for God's grace and to trust Him in all circumstances.

We have not experienced anything like what pastor Martin Rinkart experienced as his city and church were overwhelmed with death during the Thirty Years' War. But we have been deeply affected by the deaths of three dear friends, three saints and pillars in our church and community. After each one we gathered here to remember with thanksgiving and give praise to God.

This past Friday at the memorial service for Curt I talked about Curt's faith during his last 18 months.

Anyone who spent any time at all with Curt in the past year and a half can't help but have noticed how he died. The whole way he said, "I am blessed. I have no complaints, God is good and He has been good to me. I am thankful."

Curt was thankful for his stroke that led to an MRI that reveal a brain tumor. Because of that he has given 18 months to be intentional with family and friends, to prepare. He expressed thanks for so many things and in so many ways.

Curt gave thanks to God to the very end. By being able to look at life with thankfulness and to see God's past grace with thankfulness, that gave Curt hope in God's future grace. Giving thanks keeps us from despair, from self-pity, and self-absorption.

Thankful hearts see more and see more clearly. Thankful hearts are like having x-ray vision, seeing deeper and deeper into the grace and goodness of God.

This Psalm is a call to change our default settings to gratitude. Make your lists, itemize your thanks, and make sure there are just as many intangibles on the list as tangibles. Just as many things you can't buy or own or touch, things like grace, mercy, salvation, wisdom, truth, love, peace, freedom, life, hope, the Word of God, the Holy Spirit, the fellowship of believers, Jesus.

In truth itemizing our blessings should be as impossible as counting the stars.

If you would like to give some variety to your meal time prayers or your Thanksgiving celebrations, you might recite or sing this hymn.

Now let us all thank our God with all we have, with hearts and hands and voices for all He has done from our birth and all the days of our lives until today.