

Hallelujah, Anyhow
Jubilee Mennonite Church
October 8, 2017 (Thanksgiving)

Purpose: To recall that which we have for our greatest thanksgiving: our faith and identity in Christ.

Message: Despite the unending stream of bad news, we are invited into thanksgiving because of who we are, not because of what is happening.

Scripture: John 6:25-35, Philippians 4:4-9 (please read)

Synopsis: We live always at the cusp of something new. With the world of news and means of information in the palm of our hands, we are fed a continuous stream of the latest news of the world. Most of the time in these days the news has not been all that good. I have come to somewhat dread the notification on my screen that heralds another breaking news cycle. There seems to be general consensus that our world is increasingly divided, in trouble, or just generally no the place of beauty that we might wish it was.

Yet here we are called to the task of thanksgiving: returning thanks for that which God has done for us. We can wonder what it means to rejoice in troubled times. Yet it is precisely in times such as these that thanksgiving is most relevant. Thanks giving does not ignore the negative outcomes of the world, or pretend that things that we wish wouldn't happen don't have relevance. Rather it is to remind us that even here, in the midst of challenge it is God who provides. May we be given the grace to give our Hallelujahs even when our times seem troubled.

John 6:25-35

When they found him on the other side of the lake,
they said to him, ‘Rabbi, when did you come here?’

Jesus answered them, ‘Very truly, I tell you,
you are looking for me,
not because you saw signs,
but because you ate your fill of the loaves.
Do not work for the food that perishes,
but for the food that endures for eternal life,
which the Son of Man will give you.
For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.’

Then they said to him, ‘What must we do to perform the works of God?’

Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God,
that you believe in him whom he has sent.’

So they said to him,
‘What sign are you going to give us then,
so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?
Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written,
“He gave them bread from heaven to eat.” ’

Then Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you,
it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven,
but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.

For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven
and gives life to the world.’

They said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’

Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life.
Whoever comes to me will never be hungry,
and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

I have grown to seriously dislike my alarm clock. Not because it interrupts an all too short night of sleep punctuated by children wanting to be fed, changed, or just held. OK there is some of that, sure, but by the grace of my good wife for me it is largely a moot point. At this point in the game, the alarm is a bit of a redundancy as we are generally woken by a child who has a knack of hitting 7 AM right on the nose. Rather, with the alarm comes the news and with the news comes another episode in what happened in the world while we weren't looking. Most of the time this has not been terribly reassuring, and lately it has gotten downright disturbing. Shootings with casualties measured in the hundreds. Tens of thousands homeless and disposed by natural disaster. Terror attacks on seemingly safe city street. Genocide being practiced on a massive scale. The fairly realistic language of war being bandied about. And these are just the headlines this week. Its enough to have one more reason to reach for the snooze button, pull the pillow over your head an go right back to sleep for the foreseeable future. Perhaps it would get better if we would just take a break and try again later.

And it is in this context we find ourselves reading our Thanksgiving feast, remembering all that we have to be thankful for. Its our celebration of prosperity, however we are given to defining it. We pause to give thanks for what has been, and at least of some level, hope that continues through the winter we know to be coming. Even as fewer and fewer of us look to the fields for the tell tale signs of how the year has been, we give thanks for the harvest, for the stuff we have and the people we have to share it with. It is part of our DNA: when you have been given something, you say thank you. Mine In this case, it is God who gives us what we have and we owe God thanks and gratitude. We are well acquainted with the concept. I am guessing most of us do some version of this on a nearly daily basis in giving thanks before the evening meal. Yet we set aside time and space on the calendar to remind ourselves of God's goodness to us in the form of a large meal and a turkey induced nap to follow.

I selected this text today because I think it tells a good story about us. About we humans and how we go about being in the world. This interchange between Jesus and the people comes directly after Jesus finds a few loaves and a couple of fish and feeds thousands. John ends that story with Jesus pulling back into the mountains, and then sailing across the lake (the disciples sail, Jesus walks by the short way across the lake) because he knows that the people he just fed

want to make him king, by force if need be. But even these drastic steps are not enough, and the people catch up to him and do the utterly predictable: “that was great—almost like Moses!” they cry, “Let’s see you do that again.” When we find ourselves a good thing, when we are thankful for receiving even that which we least expect, we are awfully keen to make sure that we keep receiving it. More to the point, when you find someone who can fill your needs, especially basic needs like food and water, you want to keep them around and put them in charge. We are far more given to seek out the end result of the gifts of grace, the stuff we get then to consider the meaning of the fact that there is provision in the first place. Jesus is reminding the people that it is ultimately not the meal that will satisfy their needs, but rather the nourishment of the spirit which is truly on display for those inclined to see it. It is the bread of the Spirit, says Jesus, that really satisfies. It is the nourishment of the soul and the grace of salvation that must be lead to giving thanks, not just the stuff we have and the means by which we are sustained.

We can sometimes struggle to find words for our thanksgivings because our lists of worries, from the radio in the morning or the lives we live each and every day seems so impressively large. Sometimes it can feel as though Hallelujah is the last thing we are inclined to sing in the midst of a word of troubles. We can be so concerned about the state of things, and the possibility of things ever changing that we can fear that there is even a way forward. Yet even here, Jesus reminds us that here too there is bread, bread of hope, bread of spirit, bread of the living God who is not constrained by the limits of the seemingly impossible change that is so needed in the world, in our lives. We deal so often with the demands and the practicalities of the here and now—of the bread of this world, that we seldom seek the bread of the next world, let alone rely on the working of God to actually, really provide what it is that we need.

When you get down to it, maybe that is the point of giving thanks. Giving thanks to God for whatever measure of prosperity we might enjoy is one of the most counter cultural things that we can do, even when we are given the day off to do it. Because when we give thanks to God for all that God has done for us, that places the responsibility for our well-being where it rightly, and ultimately resides—in the hands of God who gives lavishly, even beyond our expectations. Thanksgiving resists the temptation toward over responsibility for plans, provisions, and adequacy that comes so easily to us and recognizes that our ultimate reality is not one of our own

choosing or our own creation, but of God's of good gift of creation to all people and all of the world. Our thanks givings are less a recitation of everything that God has done as if God needed a pat on the back from us for doing it, but rather the more radical act of giving credit where credit is actually due—to a loving creator who has made a lovely world—and trusting that identification with who supplies all we need with where what we need tomorrow will come from.

Our world, our systems, demand of us a certain amount of fear and worry in order to function well. We have to fear for our futures in order to keep up demand and to allow our worries to drive our consumption. Our thanksgiving unplugs us from that fear and asks us to recollect all that God has done in expectation of all that God is yet to do. It is a rehearsal of our relying on God and not on ourselves. Giving thanks in the truest sense is an exercise in consuming the bread of heaven that sustains far better than our mealy attempts ever can. Thanksgiving is part of our practice at transforming ourselves from the economics of empire and fear which would tell us that there can never be enough, to the promises of the kingdom where all who would come to the table will be met with good things, beyond the price and privileges of our world. This is made good because of who and what YHWH God is—the creator God whose thoughts and our thoughts are not even on the same plane. God gives generously because God is generous: not because we earned it, not because we have prayed the right prayers or found the right way of getting God on our side. We have been blessed solely that we might, in turn and bless others in the same way.

We give thanks, we sing Hallelujah to the living God not because we fail to see the problems of the world, or are inured to the suffering of others. Quite the opposite. We sing Hallelujah anyhow in spite of the state of the world because we are not solely fed by the bread that causes our tables to groan, but because we are in the practice of remembering that it is God who gives us what we need, and it is God who is going to hold all things in God's hands even to the ends of the world. Not that we each individually believe this in all place, all situations and all times. Life is too hard for all that. My standing up here and singing "Don't worry be happy" does no one any good. Sometimes, our individual voices fail us in the midst of our own rejoicing. But that is why we do not do any of this alone. Just as we cannot ever confuse the present circumstances with the reality of God in the world, we should never deny the hand of

God in providing our needs just because we individually may not be in a position at the moment to see it, let alone believe it, let alone declare it. Celebrating/ rejoicing in/Giving thanks to God is never a denial of the reality we live in nor the concerns we carry. But it is an aspect of our worship – our rejoicing – our faith that is always beyond the sum total of our moods and attitudes of right here and right now. It is a declaration of the what we know to be true in the whole of the universe—that there is a God who provides enough for each one of God’s children. God loves us so much that gives us all that we need, not just the stuff we want, but the stuff that feeds us beyond our expectation.

May we in giving thanks learn again of all that God is doing, and rejoice come what may. The God of Love is lord over heaven and Earth. How can any of us ever keep from singing?

Today we celebrate. We celebrate in thanks for all good things. We also remember that we are not alone. Today is World Communion Sunday, inviting us to be mindful of the gift of being met at the table by many, many people the world over. The Spirit of God brings us together as one body of the one Lord to be fed, strengthened and sustained by the bread of life given that we might live. And for that we give thanks.

The table is not a place that we arrive at because we are worthy of sharing it, but because we have been invited by the host to come, to be fed, to be changed by the bread that is of heaven, that gives true life. This is our fullest thanks giving. This is our biggest celebration. This is where we are given life and hope, now and forever more. All who follow Christ are welcome at this table.

Logistics

Prayer:

*Thank you, Jesus, for the opportunity to remember you
in the ordinary things of our lives.
When we eat our daily bread, rice, tortilla, or potato,
we remember how you shared what you had with your friends,
breaking yourself open.
When we drink from the fruits of our harvest,
we are reminded of how you continually bless us
with your teachings;
our chipped and well-used cups overflow.
Thank you, Jesus. Amen.*

Words of institution:

Saying I am the Bread of life