

“The Great Thanksgiving”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
October 7, 2018**

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 40:6-10

New Testament Lesson: Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:10-12

Today is World Communion Sunday, where churches around the globe and across all denominations gather in solidarity around the Table of The Lord. In a world so fractured by political, social and economic difference, how is it that the Lord’s Table is able to unite us as one? And what difference does it make; where do we go from here, after affirming our unity in Christ?

Republicans and Democrats, rich and poor, gay and straight, male and female, young and old, and all Christians of every race no matter their denomination are gathering around the Table this day in Communion with one another.

And they are all beckoned by a similar invitation to the Table, we all witness the institution of the Lord’s Supper – the breaking of bread and the pouring of wine or juice – and we all join in a prayer of thanksgiving. A prayer of thanksgiving – known as the Great Thanksgiving – is a retelling and reaffirmation of who God is, who Jesus is, and who we are in relation to God. The amazing thing is all churches of all denominations are basically praying the same thing today.

During Communion here at First Church, we use the Nicene Creed as the main portion of our Prayer of Thanksgiving. And in today’s New Testament lesson we have another version of the Great Thanksgiving, this one written by the Apostle Paul.

Here Paul tells us exactly how the Lord’s Table is able to unite all those different people as one – regardless of our political, social, economic and religious differences. And he tells us what it’s all about; why it’s so important that we gather united in Christ, and where that leads us.

So let’s look at Paul’s prayer of thanksgiving and see where it leads, shall we? Paul begins by saying, “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, ... through whom he also created the worlds.” God created the world and all things throughout the universe – us included – and then God reached out to us, first through the prophets, those human representatives who speak the word of God.

The prophets continue to speak to us today through Holy Scripture, guiding us in our growth and development as spiritual beings. But we are not only spiritual beings and need more than guidance. As human beings, no one among us can perfectly follow the law of God, the

word of God. We all fall short, and this grieves God deeply. God loves us so much and wants nothing more for us than to live in perfect harmony with the Lord, with one another, and with all creation. But how? How is it humanly possible to love all people, even our enemies?

That's what one preacher asked during her sermon. She asked the congregation to raise their hands if they had enemies. Everyone did except for Mrs. Watson in the front row, who had just turned 95. "Mrs. Watson," asked the pastor, "how could you possibly be 95 years old and have no enemies?" "That's easy," she replied. "I outlived them!"

Outliving all your enemies; I guess that's one way to go. But that's not what God has in mind. Another way would be if God were to force us; make it so you couldn't help but love God and love your neighbor as yourself. But force is never an act of love, and God is love.

So from the beginning, God planned for the best and only way that we can live in perfect harmony: through Jesus Christ. In addition to giving us his word to read and follow in scripture, God gave us himself, embodying his Living Word. Or as Paul says, Jesus "is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word."

Because Jesus is fully God and fully human, he is both at the right hand of God and also right by our side, right here with us in good times and bad. Paul says, Jesus is "the pioneer of ... salvation" made "perfect through sufferings, through sacrifice."

Now, this isn't to say that loving God and neighbor in perfect harmony is easy. It's not. Just take one good look around the world or in our communities, and even in our families. It's not easy to get along with one another. It takes courage and self-sacrifice. And that's exactly what Jesus gives us.

Because Jesus suffered – and overcame – all that we have or ever will suffer – even unto death – there is nothing to keep us from doing all we can to love God and neighbor, to live in harmony with one another. There is no sacrifice too great and no fear too big to get in between us and God, not if we are serious about our faith, and willing to do whatever it takes to share that faith with others. That's the good news; that's the gospel of Jesus Christ. That's the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving: Loving God, loving neighbors, through Jesus, and sharing that with others.

Today after worship we will share loaves of bread with others, with people we don't even know – feeding them spiritually and physically from this, the Lord's Table. The food by which our Lord feeds us is bread, one of the most basic foods in all the world. Let's stop to think for a moment how these loaves of bread came to be here today, and what that can teach us about our faith and the commitment we make as a follower of Christ, what it takes to overcome disharmony and become new creations in Christ.

Bread comes from stalks of wheat harvested from a field. The wheat is cut down by a sharp blade. The plants are gathered up and beaten down until the kernels emerge. Those kernels of wheat are then carried to a central place and mashed together between two millstones. What remains, in a humble pile on the floor of the mill, is the fine, pure powder we call flour.

But it's not over yet. After this, the flour is mixed with other ingredients, mysterious ingredients such as leaven or yeast. The mixture is kneaded and rolled out flat. Then it rises, and emerging from the oven, it is transformed into a golden brown loaf of bread, given to nourish God's people.

Is there a better symbol of the brokenness of human life, the brokenness AND the emerging wholeness contained in a loaf of bread? In Christ, we who are broken are made whole, given into a world of need so that others might live more blessed lives.

This is our common faith, professed this day in unity with all different types of people across the globe. This is what raises us up amid our difference and allows us to claim together the hope, peace, joy and love of Christian faith. This is what sends us out alongside Jesus and one another to proclaim in word and deed our love of God, trust in Jesus Christ, and unity by the power of the Holy Spirit.

I leave you with these words from Saint Augustine: "You are the body of Christ. In you and through you the work of the Incarnation must go forward. You are to be taken; you are to be blessed, broken and distributed; that you may be the means of grace and the vehicles of the eternal charity." Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, we are awed and humbled by your gracious presence among us. Who are we in light of your sovereign majesty?

You who formed us, you who know the number of hairs on our heads, you open to us the riches of your kingdom.

We thank you for your love and mercy, forgiveness and peace, comfort and protection, which are not withheld from us but rather poured out in abundance

We pray a special measure of peace and comfort for all those we continue to hold in thought and prayer.

And for all your people, O God, we ask that you renew us and heal us through your sacrificial, unconditional love, the love by which you sent Jesus into a lost and broken world that we might have eternal life with you.

We pray all this as he taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**