

December 1, 2024

Pr. Steve

Texts: Jeremiah 33: 14-16; 1 Thessalonians 3: 9-13; Luke 21: 25-33

In the name of God, Abba/Imma, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Are you in a thankful mood? Was that a good Thanksgiving? Are there plenty of things to give thanks for? You notice how thanks reorients our hearts. It begins to dissolve the fears of threats, all the nastiness around us. Those things exist there, hovering, but how shall we live in the midst of them? That's the question—that's the question.

During the days of Apartheid [in South Africa], it was common practice for the government to simply bulldoze down villages and drive people away. Imagine that! Anybody had that experience here? For the government just comes in—sometimes announced, sometimes unannounced, just bulldoze your village and scatter the people. Can you imagine? So, in one community people gathered in the evening—arrived because they'd gotten word [that] the next day the village would be gone. They gathered to pray. *'We're going to pray all night long.'* And they've been praying for half a dozen hours or so, when an old man, one of the elders of the village, stood up and said, *'Dear God, I want to thank you for loving us so much.'* Right at the edge where everything [they] had known was about to be destroyed, *"my community gone"*, not sure where the future would lead, *'Thank you for loving us so much.'*

Down deep this is what matters—Heaven and Earth will pass away; the Word of God never. [He is] trusting that Word of love, you see. We either think that old man is naïve—*'Poor old guy. He's lost it. Delusional.'*—or else he knows something that we need desperately—that grounding in love, in hope, in thanks. Despite the circumstances, keep the focus on what matters when you hear of disasters coming. *'Hold your heads high—your liberation is nigh.'* That's where the faith needs to be grounded.

It's hard because we're working so desperately for everything else to work out, aren't we? And even Thanksgiving has become intimidating for too many families in this country, right? It's in the air. We heard it all over TV. Will we get along this Thanksgiving? I hope so. Talk about intimidation! Forget global warming. It's *'My own family scares me now.'* Here's where we are. Okay, when you hear these things happening in your own family, hold your heads high. *'God's love is nigh.'* Can I get an Amen? Okay, okay.

Well, I think that in order to honor our Thanksgiving fully, I want to hear from a few of you this morning, but I'll give you an opening one that Elizabeth [Hunter Ashley] just shared with me. At the performance of the Messiah [Nov. 17], the Mezzo and the Bass, who are professional opera singers (they make a living at this—they know what they're doing—they have traveled the country, if not the world) and they came to Peace Lutheran Church because Elizabeth invited them to sing the Messiah—and they were blown away. *'What is happening here?'* Not only the quality of the evening but they couldn't get over the warmth of the people. In fact, the Mezzo emailed her twice saying, *'Thank you! Thank you! Where did those people come from? They were nice people.'* We're just not used to nice anymore, are we? Thank God! Thanksgiving. It's real; it touched their lives.

And the Bass, he entered Heaven that night and led us all there—just got bigger and bigger and bigger and finally, *“I tell you a mystery. We shall all be changed”* he was singing. And everybody there knew it, and was thankful, and grateful, and it was Real.

So, who's got something happy to share? (Perhaps the new name for our community, as Jeremiah prophesied [Jeremiah 33: 14], will be the *‘People of Happiness’*.) What are you thankful for which occurred either during this last year or over Thanksgiving? Could be great. Could be small. Who's got something to encourage the rest of us with? What are you thankful for? [Congregational gratitude stories]

*“Ric and Nana-Diccta and I shared Thanksgiving, and we had California turkey—which is known as salmon. And we played a game based on Bill’s birthday, which was trivia cards from 1949, and Ric did really well.”* Thank you.

*“So, on Thanksgiving I was with my sister and family, and we had a surprise. When I asked my niece, ‘Oh, you’re not drinking much’ (because she only had a teeny bit of champagne) [she told us] she is eight weeks pregnant with her second one!”* Beautiful. Beautiful.

*“So we got to go back to Kansas City, and be with my family for the holiday (Kansas City, Missouri, not Kansas). So we started the trip with my stepfather getting Covid, but he recovered very quickly, and then my mom got it, and was sick the whole time. And she's very stubborn—she was saying, ‘No, I’m feeling better.’ So, she sent my stepdad out to get different thermometers multiple times—because she swore she didn't have a fever, even though the thermometer kept saying she did. Anyway, this meant that my sister and I got to do Thanksgiving together, and hang out more—just the two of us—than we ever have in our whole life, which was lovely—an experience we'll probably never have again because my mom is in Thanksgiving, doing all the things usually—but this year we got to do it. And so also it was really cold there. So then (I think it was yesterday) my aunt sent a picture with my cousin Ariana laying face flat in the snow. And she wasn't even like wearing like a coat, and it was really funny. It snowed the day after we left.”*

Thank you.

*“Thanks to my son Eric and wife Carol, I made it again to my old homeland [Sweden] where I have a house—and it's not as easy as it used to be, but we have found out that we can ask for (what you call it?) a wheelchair, and we cruised through London Heathrow on the wheelchair. You know, that feels pretty cool. And Eric is a member of the [Heathrow] Lounge. So you go in there and have all the goodies you can get there. Plus, I got to see if some other friends that are still alive, because at my age, we disappear very quickly. So, it meant extra much to me. Thank you. By the way, this is the one time when the Swedes go to church—First [Sunday] of Advent.”*

Yeah, the one time all year that the Swedes go to church, First of Advent.

*"I'm thinking about 2024, and I'm really grateful to have found Peace Lutheran Church this year. And although I don't come every Sunday, I've been taking away the messages and holding onto them for weeks, and I'm just so grateful to all of you and to Steve."*

*"This Thanksgiving I was able to spend with my family—my children, and their children, and my niece here who came to take care of me for this week—and it was a real blessing."*

Anyone else?

*"My biggest family reunion was not at Thanksgiving, but this summer during our Partnership travels (and that's not my personal family, but my faith family.) Meeting old friends again after 19 years, and making new connections with new friends in Venda, in South Africa, was the highlight of my year. Thank you."*

*"I am extremely grateful for the recovery of my daughter-in-law from her brain tumor this year. Total recovery, in fact, she's got 10 times the amount of energy that I do, and they're doing everything that they want to do. And, also, last Sunday evening for Friendsgiving—I'd never been to it. It was so inspiring—so, so inspiring, and I'm so grateful for this community to put it together. Thank you. "*

*"I am so thankful for overcoming... [Can you hear me now? I'm not used to this] I'm very thankful for Pr. Steve who helped me overcome a very difficult health emergency, and actually, brought me back into my faith. And so, I'm very grateful also to Peace and the people I've met here, and, in particular, Pr. Steve."*

Anyone else? [End of congregational gratitude stories]

I'm also thankful for Melinda [applause], and to have our choir back for Advent [applause].

And very precious moments among many at the Friendsgiving/Thanksgiving celebration last week. Elizabeth Hopkins-Kurz shared 'Wild Geese' [Wendell Berry]. And then also we invited Rabbi Phil Cohen (Interim Rabbi from Beth Chaim), and Sophia Hassan (from the Islamic Center), to share a word about the experiences inside of their communities, which they did, and then presented to each other, he to her from Torah and Hebrew, and she to him a text from the Quran. Touched a lot of people.

It can be done. Friends can find a way. We can deepen the appreciation for each other—and open up a future that gives life to all of us. Yeah, 'Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.'

[Some inaudible questions/replies]

It is an ancient and true message—recognition of the dignity of others by which we are invited to live is the foundation of Jesus's deep belief in us. And more—God believes in us, that we are capable, that we are lovable, and that everything we need is now here because of that Compassion which knows no end.

In the spirit of thankfulness, I share this story from *Tattoos on the Heart*, which many of us have gotten to read. Fr. Greg Boyle came to St. Joan of Arc [Catholic Church in San Ramon] a few years ago. (About a dozen of us from Peace were there) He's a wonderful human being, working in the barrio of Los Angeles many, many years.

These brief comments [from *Tattoos on the Heart*, pp. 71-75]:

*The thing about Jesus was he wasn't just about being there for other people, he was with other people. That's what makes the difference. Jesus didn't seek out the rights of lepers, he touched them. He got involved. He wasn't kind to the outcasts, he became one. And so, it's not about taking the right stand on issues that matters. It's about standing in the right place with those who don't matter.*

*Well, at Dolores Church homeless began to sleep in the church, got up to 50 folks, and then it was a 100—and somehow on Sunday mornings there was always this faintest evidence that the homeless had slept there last night. (You know what I'm talking about—that little stench.) So, we tried everything because we were a very devout community. We tried carpet cleaner. We tried Air Wick. We tried all the products that they advertise on TV. We were so desperate, we finally tried incense to make the stink go away on Sunday mornings—it wasn't nice. But no matter what we did, or how hard we prayed, the smell remained. And then—you know congregations—the grumbling begins, those little side comments. 'Do we really need this in church? Do we?'*

*Well, here, we were assembled for worship on Sunday mornings—gang members, and homeless men and women fill the parking lot, along with AA and NA members. It was a true collection of 'Who's Who of Everybody Who is Nobody'. Welcome to our church!*

*Some people said, 'You know, this used to be a church', and I was saying "Finally, it is a church." (That's how I wanted it to look in the movies, but I never got the credits.) Well, we Jesuits say that 'If you can't fix it, then feature it.' It's an old preacher's trick, okay? You put it right in front of people's faces. See what they do.*

*So, one Sunday morning, I asked the congregation. 'What does our church smell like?' The people were mortified. All eye contact ceased, and the women began looking desperately inside of their purses to find something—there's got to be something in there. 'Come on,' I said, 'What does our church smell like?' "Huele a patas" (Smells like feet), said Don Raphael, his voice booming out. He was old and he didn't care what people thought about him anymore. 'Smells like feet!' 'Excellent,' I said, 'but why does it smell like feet?' 'Because homeless people sleep here every night.' Hmm, and why do we let that happen? "Es nuestro compromiso" (It's what we've committed to do.) Mmm-hmm. 'Well,' I said, 'Why would anyone commit to do that?' And the congregation said, "Jesus—it's what Jesus would do." "Well then, what's the church smell like now?" I asked. And one fellow said, "It smells like commitment". And the place began to cheer. And Guadalupe waved her arms wildly and shouted, "Huele a rosas" (It smells like roses.)*

*And the church roared with laughter. [They felt] their kinship with the homeless and that somebody else's odor had become their own. And it was sweet.*

*Nothing had changed and everything had changed, because we belong to each other and that's what Compassion is. It is feeling and sharing the pain of others, and that is an experience of God for which we can always give thanks. Amen.*

The peace, which surpasses all human understanding. Keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.