

Harvest Festival Sermon on Giving and Receiving

Harvest Festival, or Thanksgiving, or Erntedank (as the Germans say) is all about two things: giving and receiving. And maybe these are not two separate things at all. Maybe they are actually one – and cannot or should not be taken apart.

Receiving so many good things in life...

giving thanks for what we have received

and giving to God and other people from what we have received ...

...and by doing so establishing a never ending circle of giving and receiving between God and human beings as well as among ourselves and our fellow human beings.

This is why we are here today.

To give and to receive.

We give our thanks, we give ourselves, we give our gifts, and we experience an astonishing fullness of life!

Our Bible is full of examples and stories of giving and receiving. It is full of stories of possessions, wealth, giving gifts, being generous, offering, sacrificing, sharing with those in need.

Giving is central to the Jewish and Christian faith. People give because they are grateful for what God has given them. People then and now perceive God as extraordinarily generous, as the maker of creation, the giver of every good thing, the source of love, and the source of life itself.

People give and want to give, because they serve a giving God.

In the Old Testament many passages emphasise the importance of tithing – which means giving a tenth... giving ten percent of the first fruits (offering the first and best of harvest, livestock and income to the purposes of God). (Gen 14:20).

Offering money and other things to God results from a generosity of our heart, from our joy of life... rather than from merely doing our duty and fulfilling rigid Christian obligations.

The prophets make us aware that it cannot be only the material stuff that we give to God and please God with, but that God's reign requires justice, righteousness and faithfulness. Not just the fruits of our fields and our hands please God; he also wants the fruits of our hearts and minds, the fruits of our living a Christian life, of our prayers and our good intentions – in order to make a difference in this world. (Amos 5: 21-24).

Jesus' teachings are full of tales of rich and poor, generous and shrewd, givers and takers, charitable and selfish, faithful and fearful. He commends the poor widow putting her two coins in the treasury; giving out of her poverty, she "put in all she had to live on" (Luke 21: 1-4). The story shows us that for Jesus the proportion in which we give is more important than the actual amount.

Do I give from an abundance that I don't need anyway? Or do I really give from what I am living on? Do I give generously and extraordinarily because I worship and praise a generous and extraordinarily giving God?

In the story of the farmer who built bigger barns, placing his trust too much in earthly possession, Jesus asks the question: "And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" He warns, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:13-21). You will not be a happier person just because you accumulate riches. You will rather be happy when you can give out to others with "warm" hands, as my grandmother used to say. Rather give while I am still around and alive and see the smile in the face of the person who receives the gift, than waiting till I am gone, and what was mine is distributed anonymously – more or less...

My family had this unicycle stored in the basement. Years ago it was one of Jacob's birthday presents, and he quite liked it. But then he "grew out of it". He is far too tall - no way he'd ever sit and ride on it again.

We could keep it for Jacob's children?

Well, honestly – I don't believe in bigger barns to store everything.

We gave it away – only recently.

We gave it to a girl from church who had confidentially written a prayer request in a children's prayer time. She was desperately longing for one of those exciting vehicles... but they would, she thought, never be able to afford it.

I showed the prayer slip to Jacob, and he said, "Well, if she wants a unicycle, than she shall have one!" That was it.

We gave it to her. And I don't need to describe the surprise and the joy in the eyes of the 10-year old who now proudly possesses this magic toy.

Our "barns" are free for something new.

We rejoiced in the joy of the girl! And she is full of gratitude and happiness, and has surely learned a wonderful lesson of how to take and how to give. She's been given her heart's desire. That will surely open her up to give to others from what she has.

Do you remember Jesus' unexpected love for Zacchaeus, the tax collector? His love so radically changes the tax collector that he gives his wealth to the poor and to those who he has done wrong to.

Giving changes people.

Giving can save people's lives and make them free.

Giving can bring about justice, and it shows how God's never ending grace can transform people.

If our giving only transforms a few people a little bit, God in heaven will certainly laugh and rejoice from the bottom of his heart. I am sure!

And then look at the story of the Good Samaritan. It highlights enormous generosity.

The Samaritan not only binds up the wounds of the stranger left to die on the road, but he takes the stranger to an inn, pays for the stranger's care with his own money, and commits himself to provide for the long-term well-being of the stranger by telling the innkeeper, "When I come back, I will repay whatever more

you spend” (Luke 10:35). The Samaritan’s generosity, like Christ’s compassion knows no bounds or limits.

How about mine? And yours?

Are we faithful or fearful?

Would we have dared to give such an overwhelming gift of love and care to a stranger? Or would we have rather sneaked by, hoping somebody else would do his or her Christian duty?

In all of Jesus’ teachings, parables, and stories, the followers of Jesus see his gracious and costly gift of his sacrifice and death. Here God shows us who he really is: an unconditionally giving and loving God.

If God so loved the world (John 3:14) that he gave his only son, what can our human response to that be?

Let me share one last story with you – found in a book of an American Methodist bishop writing about Extravagant Generosity:

Caught Doing Good

A downtown congregation in a moderately-sized community had occasional homeless persons who would ask for handouts. Often street people would be found sleeping on the front steps of the church. The staff developed rules, guidelines and policies for how to help or how to refer to those who asked for help. They had many discussions about the pros and cons of giving cash, vouchers, and addresses of other social agencies. One day’s discussion took considerable staff time with few conclusions.

As the pastor was leaving the church later that afternoon, he noticed the part-time custodian carrying out the garbage to the large trash bin in the alley. There was a homeless person sprawled out beside the bin, looking barely conscious. As the custodian approached the trash bin, he set down the garbage bag he was carrying, reached into his pocket, pulled out his wallet, and removed a few dollar bills. Without having been asked, he walked over to the homeless person and gave him the money, said something, then continued his work, and returned to the church. The pastor was amazed and humbled by this extraordinary display of generosity. The part-time custodian who earned less than anyone else on staff gave generously without even being asked, while the staff had spent several hours trying to figure out policies and procedures.

The pastor asked the custodian why he gave the money without even being asked and also pressed him about whether he thought the homeless person might misuse the money for alcohol or drugs. “I always do what I can,” the custodian answered. “I give them a little money and say God bless you, because I figure that even though they may be pretty messed up, they are some mother’s son and some father’s child, and so I give them something. What they do with the money – well they have to answer to God about that. I just have to answer to God about what I do with mine.”

I just have to answer to God about what I do with mine.

That is true.

And I love it.

I will have to answer to God about what I do with mine...

...with my thanks and my gratitude, with my skills and my talents, with my personality and my qualification, with my possessions and my money, with all I have and all I am.

And when I give my answer to God, I have only one wish: I want to see a big broad smile on God's face that is mirrored in the faces of the people I live with. Amen.

Do you remember: it is all about giving and receiving today...and that is why I would like to invite you to sing: All to Jesus I surrender; all to him I freely give; I will ever love and trust him, in his presence daily live... (MH 354).