

“The Proper Distinction in Church & State”

What is Thanksgiving? For many people turkey, football and Black Friday shopping come to mind. Hopefully people also think about more important things – to take time, to step back, and to consider all their blessings and give thanks to God.

Thanksgiving is also a time of harvest, as evidenced by the bountiful spread that will gather many to the table over the next few days. It’s a time to step back and consider all those who are the Lord’s servants to give us our daily bread – thankful for the farmers, co-op workers, truck drivers and grocers and so on.

However, these blessings are not just for Christians – for as Jesus Himself says, “He makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” And, as we confess in the Small Catechism, the Lord “gives daily bread to everyone without our prayers, even to all evil people ...”

So, it is not surprising that most people will celebrate Thanksgiving in one way or another – but you are here in church on a Wednesday night – at a special service with special readings and music for this celebration. Obviously, for Christians, Thanksgiving is centered around the Lord who blesses us with this bounty. So, let’s step back and consider the blessings of the Lord and give thanks to Him.

The Lord speaks to us this evening through His Apostle Paul, in his letter to Pastor Timothy – and in this letter sets before us that which is of primary importance, it is “first of all” – that we should make “supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings” for all people. Prayer and Thanksgiving – they go together.

By the way – do you realize that you, as a Christian – have a blessing that the world does not have? You have access to God. Not only has He given you His name in Holy Baptism, so that by that name you can call upon Him in prayer – but He “urges” you to do so. The Lord wants you to pray because He wants to hear and answer prayer.

You pray not only for yourself, but also for family and nation – for farmers, co-op workers, truckers and grocers – for the sake of “all people” – bringing them, and their needs, before Our Father who art in heaven.

With this exhortation to prayer, the Apostle Paul urges us specifically to pray “for kings and all who are in high positions” – and he does this in light of two, very important, aspects – “that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” – and, because God our Savior “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” We might think of this as our life in Church and State.

As Lutherans, we have a blessing to offer the Church at large. You may have heard me reference before, C.F.W. Walther’s “The Proper Distinction Between the Law and the Gospel.” Now, let’s step back and consider the blessing of the Proper Distinction Between the Lord’s work in the Church, and His work in the State.

Why does the Lord specifically call you to pray for “kings and all who are in high positions”? Well, prayer is always a matter, and fruit, of faith. It says something about those for whom you pray – and about the Lord to whom you pray.

The king and all who are in high positions are the Lord’s representatives. The Lord has given them His authority – which they are to exercise for the sake of those they have been placed over by the Lord --- which is to say, it is the means by which the Lord is at work for the sake of the citizens.

What is the result of the Lord working through His representatives in the realm of the State – “that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.”

Peace – that is the primary blessing the Lord gives to us through those who stand in His place. The governing authorities are to punish the evildoer, and commend those who do good.

The Lord desires a peaceful and quiet life for all – to be able to live without fear of war, enemies, robbers and others who would harm us. We are blessed to have peace in this land – even as we realize that this is not the case in all places – like Ukraine, Israel, and Somalia. Where the governing authorities are not faithful in their duties – then people suffer harm from basic needs like food, water and shelter.

So, we pray and give thanks for the peace in our land, even as we pray for faithful leaders in all the nations of the earth – that all might live a peaceful and quiet life.

We pray that those who govern would commend the good by promoting godly and dignified life – promoting honesty, integrity, modesty, the sanctity of all human life, and care for one another. And we pray that they would use their authority to curb wickedness that leads to mob rule, vandalism and looting, and the disrespect for life.

We certainly have much to pray for – and to give thanks for.

The kings, the State, are to be peacemakers – promoters of a “godly” and “dignified” society. That is their God-given duty – and we should expect it from them, honor and obey them – and offer our supplications to the Lord for them.

“Godly” life, however, doesn’t mean they are promoters of the Lord – that it is their duty to preach the Gospel. The Gospel is the means of salvation that the Lord has given to the Church – and through which, He is at work for the salvation of all people.

Where this distinction is not made, there is confusion. The State is not to preach the Gospel, nor are they to be antagonistic to Christianity. The Church is not to bear the sword for the punishment of evildoers – but to bear the Gospel for the sake of all, because the Lord desires all to be saved – and this He does through His Word and Sacraments.

We pray and give thanks for this proper distinction between Church and State – knowing the truth, and giving thanks that there is “one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all” (as Paul goes on to say).

Jesus Christ has ransomed you by His blood from all your iniquity – for despising the king and others in high positions – for thinking that you are the peacemaker – for not returning to the Lord to give Him thanks for His work through the State.

By His blood you are restored to a right relationship with Him, and with those who represent Him. With this new life you pray and give thanks. You beg the Lord to give those who govern faithfulness, wisdom, self-control, and attention to duty. You give thanks for the peaceful and quiet life you enjoy, godly and dignified in every way.

In this new life you’ve been given through the blood of Jesus Christ – you gather to rejoice and to receive the very means by which He sets you free from the fear of your sins, from death, and from the power of the devil.

Knowing that He desires that all would be saved, you serve your neighbor by praying for them – praying for specific people that you will be gathered to feast with – praying that they might hear and believe the Gospel – that the Lord would grant them knowledge of the truth, and salvation in Christ Jesus.

Like the leper who returns to Jesus to worship and give thanks to Him – we are gathered to the One who heals us from sin and all it's harm. Prayer and thanksgiving go together – they are the fruit of faith – a faith that trusts in Jesus Christ alone for salvation, and rejoices in all the blessings He bestows.

The Lord bless you in your prayers and thanksgivings – even as He blesses you with His peace – now and forevermore. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.