

THANKSGIVING COMMUNITY GATHERING

Mt. Olive Clergy Association – Temple HaTikvah

November 23, 2009

Good evening. I am Becky Thane, pastor at Abiding Peace Lutheran Church in Budd Lake.

I would like to begin this evening by saying “Thank you!” to the members of Temple HaTikvah. It is especially good when we can come together to offer our praise and thanksgiving. Thank you for your hospitality.

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It is difficult for me to speak to you this evening about thanks-giving without a pragmatic assessment of what the past year has been like. To state the obvious: This has been a very difficult year.

It is most fitting, then, that this year’s gathering centers on the Psalms. I imagine that in the past year, for many of us our reflection in the Psalms may have been primarily in the words of lament that they offer.

I know of no one who is untouched by the challenges the people of this country have faced. We all know someone who is unemployed; I’m sure there are several people sitting here tonight who are suffering through unemployment. There are many others whose finances have been devastated, and whose dreams of retirement have to be pushed off for at least several more years due to the economic

downturn. This year has brought with it the added threat of Swine Flu, and its devastating effects among our young people and even among apparently healthy adults. And, of course, there remain the threats that have been with us for many years – wars and civil unrest throughout the world, and the ever-present danger of terrorism in our own country.

I am certain I am not the only one who has frequently turned to the Psalms this past year seeking words of comfort and hope. My search, however, often begins with a lament, such as Psalm 13: “How long, O Lord; will You ignore me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long will I have cares on my mind, grief in my heart all day?”¹ Indeed, how long will it be until our current troubles pass, until we once again enjoy times of economic prosperity, health, and security?

And yet, I am reminded that even this lament ends with praise: “But I trust in Your faithfulness, my heart will exult in Your deliverance. I will sing to the Lord, for He has been good to me.”²

In our times of trouble, it is important to learn from the words of the Psalmist. It’s okay to lament. The Lord cares for us at all times, both in times of prosperity and in times of woe. But even in the midst of our lament, we have the assurance that

the Lord is faithful. Even if things don't seem so bright now, the Lord HAS been good to all of us. Some times we just need to be reminded of that.

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Perhaps sometimes we also fall into the trap of thinking that gratitude is a feeling. Feelings are fleeting. For instance, how many of us have come to realize that the intense feelings of love we felt when we first met our spouses have, over time, grown into something quite different? It's still love, but a different kind of love. It's a love that's not a moment-to-moment feeling; it's a love that truly wishes for the best for the other, many times to the point of self-sacrifice. It's love that's a *choice*, not some fleeting feeling.

And so, I think, it is for true feelings of gratitude for what The Lord has done for us. Gratitude can, indeed, be an intense, in-the-moment feeling. But *true* gratitude can – and probably should – also be a lifelong attitude, where, even in the midst of lament, we can yet proclaim gratitude for the Lord's graciousness.

I think this is not some naïve attitude. Even modern psychological research is proving that we *can* learn to proclaim, with the Psalmist: “I will praise You, Lord, will all my heart.”³

For instance, Robert Emmons, a professor at the University of California – Davis, is pioneering research on what many are calling a “gratitude attitude.” Dr.

Emmons says that even pretending to be thankful raises levels of the brain chemicals associated with pleasure and contentment. “Live as if you feel gratitude, he [says], and soon the real thing will come.”⁴ Dr. Emmons also says that “‘Gratitude is never so important as during those times when everything appears to be lost.’ Finding something to appreciate can save us from absolute despair – in a way that abject complaining cannot.”⁵

And so, perhaps this is the lesson today for those of us whose life circumstances may mire us in lament during Thanksgiving this year. Perhaps if it’s hard to find anything to be thankful for, we should take up the challenge of *learning* an attitude of gratitude.

A good place to start might be with a gratitude journal or list. This might be things as simple as, “I’m thankful for the wonderful walk I had with my dog,” or, “Morning coffee.” But the point is that perhaps it’s easier to achieve a gratitude attitude if you are consciously looking for things to be grateful for. And again, modern psychological research bears out the benefits: “One major study showed that people who wrote down what they are grateful for felt 25 percent happier after ten weeks than those who did not.”⁶

Martin Seligman, author of the book *Authentic Happiness*, takes this notion one step further. He suggests that you make a “gratitude visit” to someone who has

made a major difference in your life, someone you've never properly thanked.

Seligman suggests that you “compose a detailed letter to him or her that expresses your appreciation in concrete terms, then read it aloud, face-to-face.”⁷

I would like to make a similar suggestion to those of us gathered here tonight. This Thanksgiving, it might be appropriate to write a thank-you letter to the Lord. We've taken the first step in our “gratitude visit” this evening, with gathering in this place to recall the Lord's faithfulness and join our voices in giving thanks. But perhaps the next step is to make it personal. What things are *you* thankful for? It is, indeed, time to give thanks to the Lord with your whole heart, and tell of all the Lord's wonderful deeds.

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In my religious tradition, the Psalm appointed for Thanksgiving is Psalm 126.

It reads:

When the Lord restores the fortunes of Zion

– we see it as in a dream –

our mouths shall be filled with laughter,

our tongues, with songs of joy.

Then shall they say among the nations,

“The Lord has done great things for them!”

The Lord will do great things for us
and we shall rejoice.

Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
Like watercourses in the Negeb.

They who sow in tears
shall reap with songs of joy.

Though he goes along weeping,
carrying the seed-bag,
he shall come back with songs of joy,
carrying his sheaves.

This is a most appropriate Psalm for us tonight. It reminds us that not only has the Lord done great things for us, but the Lord will also do great things for us in the future. It reminds us that those of us who are suffering now will be restored. It is an acknowledgement of present suffering, tempered by hope for the future. It is lament, and yet it is praise.

Look around the see. The Lord has been good to us. “Praise the Lord, for He is good; His steadfast love is eternal!”⁸

Amen.

<1,270 words>

¹ JPS *Tanakh*, Psalm 13:2-3

² JPS *Tanakh*, Psalm 13:6

³ JPS *Tanakh*, Psalm 9:2

⁴ David Hochman, "Life is better with a gratitude attitude," in *Reader's Digest* (White Plains, NY: Reader's Digest, November 2009), 164.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 164-5

⁸ JPS *Tanakh*, Psalm 107:1