

Thanksgiving is the theme of this week. Listening carefully to the apostle Paul, we discover a three-step structure that leads to gratitude and another one that exerts thankfulness. The first three steps encompass a movement that comes from God, reaches us and goes forth to our fellow-Christians. The second line of steps will turn back to God and give Him thanks for what has come from us and will link them to us in heartfelt gratefulness for what God has granted to us. The first three steps are these: God grants and gives graciously, we receive and pass on from what He has given to us, and others greet and welcome what we have spent for them. In turn, they will praise the Lord and give thanks to Him for His graciousness and bounty that has enabled us to be generous ourselves and to be sharing with those who need our support.

It is noteworthy however, that Paul in the first place does not speak about material gifts, but of spiritual presents: God will “enlarge the harvest of your righteousness”. We all know – as Lutheran theologians in particular – that such righteousness is nothing we have accomplished, earned or merited. Rather this very righteousness is bestowed upon us out of mere grace for the sake of Christ, and received in faith. That is to say: Even though there is a whole lot in our lives that is wrong, because we still do wrong, even as Christians and believers, God declares us righteous in His eyes. There is nothing on our side that we could make demands on. There is nothing in us that we could claim before God. Rather He is willing to accept us, although we are the way we are, and although we do act the ways we act. Rather He is willing to forgive, where we fail to meet the goals he has set for us and our lives. For, Christ has vouched for us on the cross of Calvary, and His sacrifice has made us acceptable in His Father’s eyes. Indeed, an indescribable gift – a gift above all gifts.

And this gift and present is not just something to stick with us, it is nothing to be bunkered in our hearts and souls, nothing to be possessed by ourselves and kept to ourselves. Quite the opposite! This gift is meant to reach us and to fill us, but just to be passed on. We might be compared to vessels, into which God pours all His mercy, grace, and benevolence to such an abundance that we simply cannot contain them and keep hold of them. Instead, we are overflowing with generosity and willingness to serve that “supply the needs of God’s people”, as the apostle puts it.

Is this statement fishing for compliments only on Paul’s side in order to motivate the Corinthians to donate more richly than they have done already? For it is obvious that the mother church of Christianity, Christ’s flock of believers in Jerusalem, is in dire straits in many a regard, economically and financially. Therefore – is this but a well-considered, clever fundraising strategy applied by the apostle? Indeed, it is a plea directed to the Corinthians to give, to share, to spare time and money to be provided for the needs and necessities of the brothers and sisters in need. But the motive that Paul is trying to suggest to the Christian congregation in Corinth, is founded in God’s salvific actions towards them and is aimed at resulting in thanksgiving towards Him.

And right in the middle of this twin movement, the Corinthians find themselves linked and obligated to their Jerusalem fellow-Christians, and those reciprocally, find themselves connected and tied to their Christian brothers and sisters who indeed are sons and daughters in faith of the first Christian community. For, what the Corinthians may ever donate to the Jerusalem congregation is seen by Paul as “obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel”. That is to say helping and supporting those in need is nothing but a follow-up to believing in Christ’s redeeming work, a consequence that transfers what Christ has endowed us with.

Does such a view look like primitive Christianity romanticism? Or is this an Early Church reality that we do not approximate nor come up to? Or does Paul simply portray an over-optimistic ideal, that none of us could ever reach? No, for that would belie the earnestness that Paul is pursuing, and at

the same time, it would deny all the apostle says about God's magnanimity and contest even the reliability of God's promises.

Having come here this morning for confession and absolution, we will have to thoroughly consider what we are lacking in terms of the picture set before us, and seriously ponder where we fall short of implementing the example given in the Corinthian generosity. The main reason, as far as I can see, why we seem to suffer from deficiencies compared to the early Christians, is that we oftentimes tend to underestimate God's graciousness, and at the same time, undervalue what God has given to us.

Over and over again, we have to be reminded that "God himself has revealed and opened to us the most profound depths of his fatherly heart and his pure, unutterable love. For this purpose he created us, so that he might redeem us and make us holy, and, moreover, having granted and bestowed upon us everything in heaven and on earth, he has also given us his Son and his Holy Spirit, through whom he brings us to himself", as Luther writes in the Large Catechism (LC, Creed, 3rd Article 64, Kolb/Wengert, 439).

For, we are such forgetful people, and fearful ones, too. Time and again, we rather focus on what we do *not* have instead of cherishing what we have got; again and again we concentrate on what we do *not* have achieved instead of holding in high esteem what has been granted to us. Over and over, we heed motto: "Enough is not enough!", instead of being satisfied with what has been given to us. This happens a good many times when we start comparing ourselves to others. Then envy takes hold of us, and contentment disappears from our hearts. The feeling of being neglected conquers us, and confidence vanishes from our minds. Then frustration overwhelms us, and gratitude fades away from our souls.

Against such negative impressions, depressive moods, hopeless perspectives and futile attitudes a powerful objection is raised by Paul: "God will supply and increase your store of seed." That is to say: There is something in you - although you may not beware of it - that God has given to you. There is something imparted to you that you may underestimate, but it is there. There is something that God wants to grow, to blossom, to flourish, to prosper within yourselves: a God-given fortune, you only have to realize, a God-granted wealth, you only have to notice, a God-given potential, you only have to activate. Just ponder on what it might be. All of us are gifted people endowed with spiritual and/or material gifts granted to us by God Himself. One may be able to pray for others, another one may be good in carefully listening to other, yet another one may be good in consoling and comforting others, then there are those who are brilliant in explaining about the faith, and others again who are excellent to motivate others to play a part in the life of the congregation, etc., etc. It is just about discovering the treasures God has bestowed upon us.

Therefore, let us kneel and confess our forgetfulness and negligence in terms of all the good that God has done to us and ask His forgiveness. Moreover, let us beseech our heavenly Father to send us His Holy Spirit anew that this Spirit may open our eyes, the earthly ones as well as the spiritual ones to make us see the abundant riches and all-surpassing grace God has given us. In this way, our hearts and minds and souls will be transformed: Instead of holding and dark thoughts and evil feelings, they will be filled with thankfulness and overflow with gratitude, for the benefit of our fellow-Christians and to honour His graciousness: His holy name shall be praised forever. Amen.