

SUNDAY, March 3 2024 Lent 3 “The Great thanksgiving”

Psalm 116, I Corinthians 11:23-25 Luke 22 : 14-23

“Prayers of the Heart”—In this season of Lent, we have focused on The Lord’s Prayer, Prayers of Lament “Hear My Cry” and today our focus is on what we call the Great Thanksgiving prayer. Other Christian denominations may call it the Eucharistic Prayer or the Holy Communion prayer but in our tradition “The Great Thanksgiving” is a prayer shared when one of the two sacraments is occurring.

The Great Thanksgiving is a prayer of giving thanks to God for we are asking the Holy Spirit to enliven and empower our prayers so that we will join with the faithful in seeking the will and way of God. It is the Holy Spirit which calls us to be together as we share with a cloud of witnesses that spans millennia from around the world and brings us together. It is a joyful feast of gratitude because of God’s gift of grace. Grace is what separates us as Christians because we are redeemed through Jesus’ death and resurrection. So it is at a common table that we proclaim Jesus and pray for the gifts of the Spirit. But why do we do this? It is our response to God’s goodness as we ‘lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord’ as stated in Psalm 116:13. We are to praise and offer thanks to God.

When we gather at the table of Jesus, we are focusing on the mysterious and ancient, the familiar and always new. Mysterious because we are drawn into prayerful communion with the triune God. It is ancient because it is a richly woven fabric of sources woven together into the early church. Yes, Jewish liturgy provided abundant resources for praying, thanking and blessing God and those early believers of Christ, adapted these traditions.

What is familiar? Each season of the church year we reflect on biblical stories of Jesus experiences with people- from his birth, times of teaching, wilderness of Lent, his passion and death and the hope of the Resurrection. Even though what we do is just eat and drink, there is so much more to make this a feast—for eyes, ears and body.

As we share in this Prayer, it is also always new because it calls us toward the coming realm of God! So when we hear “The Lord be with you.” It is time to focus on the words and responses, to lift up our hearts and be open to God! To receive the blessing of the Spirit here and now!

The Bible offers little evidence about the texts of the Great Thanksgiving, but there is a consistent pattern of action which occurs whenever Jesus shares a meal with his followers:

Taking, blessing, breaking and giving. Remember the story of Jesus feeding the multitude? He took the bread from the small boy, he raised it in blessing, he broke it and shared it giving it to all present—and there were leftovers!

So also did he take, bless, break and give when he shared the Passover meal; and when he shared with friends after their journey to Emmaus. It was when Jesus broke the bread that these two followers realized who was with them the whole way home!

Our reading from Luke 22 is the account of what occurred as Jesus and his apostles shared in the Passover feast. Jesus says, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” Why was Jesus so eager? He knew what was going to happen—betrayal, arrest, trial and then death. But he wanted to spend this time with these people his followers. But he did something else—when they had finished eating, he took the cup, gave thanks,

We read in 1 Corinthians 11: 23-25 what is known as the words of Institution as Paul recorded the words of Jesus as he and the disciples shared Passover together. Paul states that he received instructions on the Lord’s Supper and shared this with the people of the Corinthian church. Paul describes Jesus took a loaf of bread, gave thanks and broke it. In the same way he took the cup after supper and said this is the new covenant in my blood. And then Paul states, “Do this in remembrance of me.”

Since the time of Paul’s letters there have been a few emerging practices of the prayers. The Didache is a manual for life in the Christian community going back to the first century includes prayers of thanksgiving for the bread and cup and for the meal. Many times during the second century the prayers were improvised but in the 3rd and 4th centuries the text for the dialogue between presider and people was recorded in “The Apostolic Tradition.” Through subsequent centuries different prayers were developed by the different traditions each influential to others and inspired the prayers’ structure which generated different streams of the prayer overall.

But why is the Great Thanksgiving a prayer of the heart? Because we celebrate the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper in the presence of the Risen Lord, who is with us. Jesus is present in the feast he prepares and thus this prayer is intended to be a joyful prayer in Jesus’ presence. However Jesus is also present with us as He is the Word of God through the scriptures. We hear the words of the gospel, celebrate the mystery of faith and believe that

Jesus who died is risen and is coming to reign in glory. So when we worship and hear the message of Christ and share in the sacrament we truly are blessed.

What is included in this Great Thanksgiving prayer? It is a Trinitarian prayer offered to God (the Father) through Jesus Christ (the Son) in the unity of the Holy Spirit. It consists of thanksgiving to God, remembrance of Jesus Christ and invocation or calling of the Holy Spirit.

1) Introduction dialogue “the Lord be with you”

2) praise and gratitude to God for the gifts of God’s grace in creation and the events of salvation history. This section often refers to the season of the church year and the relationship between God and people

3) *Sanctus* Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.

These words have been established by Christian traditions through the centuries and focus us what is Holy/ Sanctus/ sacred—God.

4) life and ministry of Jesus- as well as his death, resurrection, ascension promise to return and sometimes includes the words of Institution.

5) this is followed by the *Memorial Acclamation* Dying, Rising, Christ will come again

6) Blessing of the Spirit of what takes place “Through Christ, with Christ and in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit all glory is yours... AMEN

This Great Thanksgiving prayer of the heart calls upon all who share it to do 4 things- 1) thank God for creation, covenant, seasonal blessings, praise

2) remember God in Jesus Christ- from his birth- life, death, resurrection, and promise of coming, institution of the Supper

3) call upon the Holy Spirit to draw the people into Christ’s presence so that they may be fed, joined in the communion of saints and to the risen Christ then sent observe as faithful disciples and 4) share in the Lord’s Prayer

Through the ages people have come to realize the importance of sharing in this sacrament. Each congregation has their different ways of sharing- eating and drinking together or alone, eating the bread only, or juice only. IT depends upon comfort levels of people and of

course as we have learned since the pandemic—what is safely shared. But the meaning is the same- we are one in Christ because we have answered the call to do what Jesus asked, remember him. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

As we prepare to share in the sacrament of Holy Communion, just reflect for a moment about how many people throughout history have received the bread, drank from the cup and lived to serve Christ well. How many people have eaten the bread and drank from the cup and have been blessed to tell others? And done so many times throughout their lives. How often have you taken, given thanks, received and shared with others in the Spirit of God through Jesus? What part of the Great Thanksgiving speaks to you in this moment?

As we share in the sacrament today, let us take time to reflect on the words of this prayer of the heart knowing that we are not the first to speak these words in hope or in love. But we are a part of the community of believers who are sharing today. Let us give thanks as we share in prayer from our hearts.

PRAYER

God of grace you know our hearts are heavy and you know us through and through. Hear our prayers as we come to you and gather around the table of Jesus Christ. Bless us in what we say and do as we praise you now and always. SILENCE> Amen.