

“More Than Honorable Mention”

“Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth! Serve the Lord with gladness; come before His presence with singing. Know that the Lord, He is God; it is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people, and the sheep of His pasture. Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise; be thankful to Him, and bless His name. For the Lord is good; His mercy endures forever, and His faithfulness to all generations.” (Psalm 100, Modern English Version)

As American Christians, you and I are blessed to have one of our prominent Christian holy days (Christmas Day) also recognized by our government as a federal holiday. But it is the only federal holiday that is also a historic Christian celebration. And this shouldn't really shock us because the state recognizes persons and events considered important in the realm in which it carries out its God-given responsibilities – just as the church recognizes her important celebrations in the kingdom in which God has given her authority. Other than Christmas, does the state ever acknowledge other church celebrations, and does the church ever acknowledge state holidays?

Well, sometimes. Perhaps political leaders will send Lenten or Easter greetings to Christians. Some secular employers even allow paid time off for Christian holy days like Christmas, Good Friday, or Easter. And the church, likewise, sometimes gives a certain amount of recognition to state holidays or even cultural observances – even if it is no more than honorable mention. For example, some congregations will have New Year's Eve or New Year's Day worship services. Perhaps a patriotic hymn or two will be sung in some congregations on the Sunday before or after Independence Day. Maybe a prayer thanking God for the vocation of parenthood will be said in worship on Mother's Day and Father's Day.

But this month, Americans will enjoy a day which is not only a federal holiday and a popular cultural celebration but is also a day that many Christians deem as appropriate to gather together for worship. And the day that I'm talking about is Thanksgiving. For while New Year's Eve and New Year's Day worship services have decreased in attendance and popularity over the years, Thanksgiving Eve/Day worship services remain consistently observed and are still popular throughout our church body. It is an American holiday that receives more than honorable mention within the church.

And in our country, Thanksgiving Day is observed on the fourth Thursday in November. On this day, secular leaders (perhaps in an effort to not show any particular religious favoritism) will sometimes suggest that we thank a generic deity. And individual Americans and their families who observe this holiday may express thankfulness for all sorts of things and may celebrate this day in differing ways and observe traditions that vary from person to person. And while our celebration of Thanksgiving Day is an American holiday with its own unique characteristics, yet the US is not the only nation that celebrates a day of thanksgiving.

And even though our Thanksgiving Day (which is uniquely American) obviously isn't a liturgical holy day that has been celebrated by Christians down through all of history, yet we in the LCMS observe it as an occasion to worship. And Christians, of course, bring a distinct understanding to

this holiday - for they know who to credit for all their blessings. For see, Christians ***“know that the Lord, He is God.”***

For thankfulness to the true God, the Triune God, is confessed many, many times throughout the Bible. Therefore, down through the centuries the church has included petitions of thanksgiving in her prayers and liturgy – like Psalm 100, which in our lectionary is the appointed Psalm for Thanksgiving Day. For the Lord has not only given us life but He also daily provides for all of our bodily needs. ***“It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves.”***

And He has purchased what every human being needs most – namely, forgiveness of sins, deliverance from Satan, rescue from death, and reconciliation with God. For by the life, suffering, and death of His Son Jesus Christ, God has saved us. And through the gift of faith, a gift created and sustained through His Means of Grace, our crucified and risen Lord gives us the saving gifts He earned for us. For ***“we are His people, and the sheep of His pasture.”***

My friends, gratitude and appreciation are things that even non-Christians also can feel and express. But the difference between Christians and unbelievers is that those not baptized into Christ are unable to confess who it is who ultimately deserves our thanks and praise. Therefore, thankfulness means something to those in Christ that it cannot mean to a fellow American who lacks faith in the one, true, and only God. And because gratitude and praise are a fundamental part of Christian prayer, the church finds it very appropriate to gather together to worship on our country’s appointed day of thanksgiving. For believers understand that giving thanks deserves far more than mere honorable mention. So, regardless of how the rest of our countrymen observe Thanksgiving Day this month, we Christians proclaim: ***“Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth! Serve the Lord with gladness; come before His presence with singing.... Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise; be thankful to Him, and bless His name.”***

And even if the time should tragically come when Thanksgiving Day is no longer recognized as a national holiday in America, the church will continue to ***“give thanks in all circumstances”*** (1 **Thessalonians 5:18, ESV**) just as she has done for millennia. For Christians know what the Lord has done for them and what He promises to do for them throughout eternity. So, they believe and confess that ***“the Lord is good; His mercy endures forever, and His faithfulness to all generations.”*** Therefore, let us ***“be thankful to Him, and bless His name.”***

See you in church this Thanksgiving Eve (and every Sunday) to praise and thank our God and Savior who gives us life which shall never end.

Pastor