

Sermon: 15th Sunday after Pentecost – Thanksgiving Sunday

Text: Hebrews 13:1, 5, 6, 15, 16

Theme: Sacrifice of praise

Goal: To encourage people to sacrifice their lives and goods toward God and toward the needy as a faith reaction to the sacrifice Jesus did for us on the cross.

Dear Friends,

Introduction: As we celebrate Thanksgiving Sunday today, it is good to remember its origin in the Old Testament Covenant to understand our text better, and what is the focus in the New Testament Covenant as the text says, “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise”.

I – The Old Testament Harvest Feast: Sacrifices

Moses gave the first directions how to celebrate the Harvest Feast (Leviticus 23:15-22). They have to bring as an offering to the Lord: two loaves of bread, a lamb, grain, olive oil and wine – representatives of the blessings God had given them. This was offered as a sacrifice and part of the offerings were burned on the altar. Besides the sacrifices according to the Law, Moses said, “Celebrate the Feast of the Weeks to the Lord your God by giving a freewill offering in proportion to the blessings the Lord God has given you. And rejoice before the Lord your God!” (Deuteronomy 16:10, 11). This Feast was later called Pentecost, because it was celebrated 50 days after Easter. On the first Pentecost of the Christian Church, God poured out the Holy Spirit upon the disciples and almost 3,000 people were ‘harvested’ into the Christian Church confessing their faith in Jesus and having been baptized.

Harvest Festivals were and are celebrated all around the world, especially in rural areas. The most famous of them happens every

year at the end of November in the USA, remembering how the first pilgrims didn't starve in the new land. It's one of the biggest holidays in America.

II – The sacrifice of Christ

No more sacrifices of animals, offering of blood and other stuff are necessary any more in the New Testament Era. “Jesus suffered outside the city gates to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him”, says our text.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews compares the Old Testament Covenant and the New Testament Covenant, saying that all the rituals, all the sacrifices, all the promises were accomplished in Jesus' death and resurrection. We are in a new relationship with God by faith in Jesus. Now, the last chapter of this Letter shows how this new relationship works in our daily life. Very practical guidance is given as how to live our faith among our family, in the society and in the church. Fruits of faith are shown in our relationship to our neighbour. And these are called as “sacrifice of praise’.

III – The New Testament Sacrifices of Praise

The key word of this chapter is in the first verse: “Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters.” This goes back to Jesus' many thoughts about love and to what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:3: “If I give all I possess to the poor...but have no love, I gain nothing.”

The first deed of love in the New Covenant is to give ourselves to the Lord. It's a 'sacrifice of praise'. Paul wrote: “Therefore, I urge you, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship” (Romans 12:1).

A story of the first mission fields in Africa tells that a missionary organized a big Thanksgiving celebration. He put several big baskets

in the central part of the village and invited people to bring their thanksgiving offerings. People brought what they had. A little girl, an orphan, observing people's offerings, walked to and sat on one of the baskets. As the missionary asked her, 'what does this mean?'; she answered, 'I am poor and I don't have anything to offer but myself...'

Among the several guidelines in this chapter, one says: "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?" – Paul wrote to Timothy ^(6:10): "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many grief." – Money is good and necessary; but it becomes sin when we rely on it, love it and become slave of it. Money must be managed according to God's will, and our confidence must be in the Lord only!

The Sacrifice of Praise flows from our faith in Jesus. The text says: "**Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.**"

The word 'sacrifice' appears twice in this text:

First, "sacrifice of praise - the fruit of lips that openly profess his name". Our service, our hymns, our worship, whenever we confess our faith inside and outside the church, all is a 'sacrifice of praise', is a Thanksgiving Offering, using the terminology of the Old Testament. Second, "And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased."

Paul gave thanks for some donations he had received from the church in Philippi while in prison in Rome and he called them as “an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.” He wrote: “I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.”

Whatever good we do and whatever we share with others, not just with needy people, is a ‘sacrifice of praise’. We shall not be selfish. Every deed of love among our family, in our workplace, in the church and in the society is a ‘sacrifice of praise’. The church serves as an agency of God to concentrate some good deeds of the members to share them with needy people. We are not farmers, we don’t depend on what we sow and harvest, but we depend on our salary or our pension to buy what we need. So, from what we buy we share something with the needy. This is a ‘sacrifice of praise’ and “with such sacrifices God is pleased”.

We shall be reminded as well that ‘to share’ is not just to give the leftover. This is fine too. But to share, as our text says, means to give what we have, what we like. Therefore the word ‘sacrifice’ is appropriated. It is not easy to share what we like, to give away what we can use. It demands a sacrifice. “With such sacrifices God is pleased”.

Conclusion: Thanksgiving Sunday is not just one of the Sundays in the year. It’s a reminder to practice thanksgiving every day. As we bring our Luther’s Loot donations every month, this is part of our ‘thanksgiving offering’ and of our ‘sacrifice of praise’. Be sure that this pleases God, because it is done “through Jesus”, who gave Himself for us to redeem us for a new life, a life of love toward God and toward our neighbour. Amen.