**Thanksgiving: More than a Feeling**

A sermon preached at Lawrence Park Community Church,

Oct. 13, 2019

Exodus 20:12-17

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Growing up in the Christian Reformed Church, over fifty years ago, I had to go to a Heidelberg Catechism class every Wednesday night, for an hour. The minister taught most of the classes. We sat around the big table in the church’s Council Room, pea-shooters in hand, passing notes, popping bubble gum, whispering, and sometimes engaging in outright rebellion.

Our parents made us go. And so, eventually, by the time I was confirmed at sixteen, I knew our catechism backwards and forwards. But what was this catechism, actually?

Well, the word, “catechism,” comes—by way of Latin—from Greek words meaning “to speak down to.” Catechisms are summaries of church doctrine handed down by teachers to church members.

The Heidelberg catechism I studied was written in 1563, 450 years ago. Heidelberg was a lone Calvinist town in a sea of Lutheran and Catholic territory, and so the Calvinists there felt they needed a defense of their faith. The resulting catechism was divided into fifty-two Lord’s Days, so that one could be preached every Sunday afternoon. I still followed this practice in my first two congregations. I’d write one sermon on a scriptural passage for the morning, and another on a Lord’s Day teaching for the afternoon, year after year. I have it easy, now, in the United Church!

Now, most denominations have catechisms or similar faith statements, including the United Church. But the Heidelberg Catechism is different than most for its near-poetic tone, its simplicity and pastoral sensitivity. For example, it begins with this question: “What is your only comfort in life and death?” The answer, which everyone in the Christian Reformed Church knows, begins, “That I am not my own, but belong, body and soul, to my faithful savior, Jesus Christ.”

What interests me most, however, this Thanksgiving Sunday, is how the Heidelberg Catechism handles thanksgiving—that is, how it handles gratitude, a synonym for thanksgiving. You see, in the Heidelberg Catechism, we are taught not merely to feel thankful, but rather, in all things, to express gratitude in concrete acts.

It’s worked like this. The first few Lord’s Days are about human sin and misery. That’s the subtitle, in fact, “Misery.” Then, a large part of what follows is about how God solved the sin problem. This section of the catechism explains Jesus’ life and death, the Apostle’s Creed, and the Sacraments. Its subtitle is “Deliverance.”

So, Misery, Deliverance, and finally, the last subtitle is “Gratitude.” The catechism concludes with twenty Lord’s Days—twenty Sundays worth of instruction—on gratitude, on thanksgiving. That is, nearly half of the catechism explains how we should live in gratitude for the example and teachings of Jesus. We can do so, says the catechism, by obeying the ten commandments and living the spirit of the Lord’s Prayer.

Here, the section on the ten commandments is most interesting to me. You see, instead of focusing on the “thou shalt not’s,” as a way of living a life of gratitude, this part of the Heidelberg catechism turns each of the ten commandments into a permission—ten little poetic essays on how we can shape our lives around doing gratitude via positive concrete actions, rather than just thinking about it, or feeling it, inside.

Let me briefly give you three examples. The sixth command states, “You shall not murder.” Keeping this command requires, says the catechism, that we not murder, which includes making sure that we do not belittle, hate, insult our neighbor. So much for the “thou shalt not” part of this command. But positively, “thou shalt not murder” is permission to concretely express gratitude by being, quote: “patient, peace-loving, gentle, merciful and friendly,” even to your enemies. That’s exercising your thanksgiving muscle.

Similarly, the eighth commandment, says “You shall not steal.” The catechism says that negatively, this means you should not counterfeit, charge excessive interest, or use inaccurate measures. But positively, not stealing is permission to express gratitude, to “do whatever I can for my neighbor’s good, that I treat others as I would like them to treat me, and that I work faithfully so that I may share with those in need.” That’s thanksgiving.

Finally, the ninth commandment says we should not bear false witness—we shouldn’t lie. The catechism says this means “I should twist no one’s words, not gossip or slander.” But positively, a life of gratitude suggests that, concretely, I should love the truth, speak it candidly, and openly acknowledge it . . . to guard and advance my neighbor’s good name.” That’s thanksgiving.

Do you catch the flavor of it, though? The catechism I grew up with, for all of what I see now as its doctrinal narrowness, makes a good point here. The catechism treats gratitude—what we call thanksgiving—as a life-defining verb, as stuff we can do, rather than just think or feel.

Well, I used to sit with my friends around the church’s council table, not very happy about it either, learning the catechism. But somehow, in spite of our fidgeting and rowdiness this lesson about gratitude as a lifestyle sunk in. The Christian life is not so much about the “Thou Shalt Nots” as it was about permission to do good things for our family, friends, and even the whole world.

This Thanksgiving, many of you will sit around tables too, with family, friends, or perhaps even with strangers at a soup kitchen or Out of the Cold event. There will be fidgeting and rowdiness by the kids. There will be adults around the table who don’t get along very well with some of the others around the table. What happens next?

Well, how about this? Instead of just *feeling* thanks, or imagining that you are grateful deep inside for your blessings, do you think you could commit to giving thanks by acting it out, as a verb, in positive ways? Could you let your gratitude breathe by what you say about others, by how you do things to lift others up, heal breaches, and generally treat whoever you meet with dignity and kindness? Give your gratitude permission to be expansive by what you do with the money and things you have to enjoy and share, by what you do with your time, your influence in business or the public square.

We do have a lot to be thankful for, these days. Unemployment is at near-historic lows. As much as we worry about violence in Toronto’s streets, it is also true that crime rates are near historic lows, at least per capita. We enjoy a social safety net. We have great medical care that doesn’t bankrupt us—just read Rev. Eric Bacon’s praise for Sunnybrook in last Friday’s update. We have Government pensions, high ways that are in good repair and safe to drive, and a business climate that has allowed many of us to succeed doing what we loved. Some Americans may think that they need to make America great again, but I’m telling you—Canada is great now, thank God.

And on the side of religion, here in church, we can give thanks for divine meaning in our lives, for the example of Jesus that inspires us, for good ideas about morality, for a community of friends and neighbours, art shows and music, volunteer opportunities and – dare I say it – decent sermons, especially from its newest minister.

We have a lot to be thankful for. We all could go on and on. And what we need to do, in response, is turn our gratitude inside out, from a felt thing into a verb, from a feeling into an action. So . . .

When you brush up too close to people in the subway—but don’t scowl. When you walk by a homeless person in the street, and drop a toonie in their cup, even though you know it will take government action to really fix the problem . . . when you are asked to support Girl Guides by buying cookies or when you go to work and wonder not only how you can increase your firm’s bottom line, but also how you can increase the firm’s social ROI when by doing so. When you vote for your neighbours well-being rather than just your own . . . when you volunteer at the ROM or hospital or food bank, open a door for someone slower than you, and smile . . . that’s all thanksgiving, and we turn our thanksgiving by way of concrete acts into a way of life that focusses on good for others just as much as it is focused on good for ourselves.

Thanksgiving. It’s a verb. Every moment of our lives and all the influence we have at home or in government or business is a chance to exercise it. Gratitude. It’s the permission Jesus has given us not merely to feel satisfied, but from our largesse, to share ourselves with others.