

Faith Mennonite Church  
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**Dare we give thanks?**  
*Psalm 106:1-8, 44-47; Psalm 126*

It's been a difficult week and a half. First came news from Beirut and Paris of new terrorist attacks. Then came the back lash: fear that has raised its head in the form of anti-refugee sentiments that resulted in governors closing the door of their states to refugees from Syria and US House of Representatives passing an anti-refugee bill—the quickest bill to pass through the house chamber in years! Fear of the *possibility* of danger slams the door and hearts to shut out people who have *already suffered the reality* of danger and have been living with little if any guarantee of the most basic rights, protections, and comfort.

And here in our own city, another young, unarmed black man, is dead at the hands of the very officers who we trust to protect life, not take it. In this case, the surge of emotion seen in the actions of the Black Lives Matters movement has been one that defies fear, that calls for justice, that doesn't relent or give up hope even through the rain, the dropping temperatures, and police intimidation. It has been a rallying of people across race and class, across religious lines, to call attention again to the deep fissures of racism and poverty in our city.

And here comes the Thanksgiving holiday. *Dare* we give thanks in the midst of so much that is painful and ugly in our world? And if so, *how* do we give thanks?

By now it won't be surprising to hear me say that the Psalms are a time-tested guide for how to give thanks at all times, in all things, including the worst of times.

There are many Psalms of thanks and we have chosen only a couple this morning as our guide. And within those I wish to highlight just two things: first, authentic thanksgiving involves confession, and second, there is no situation too dark in which to utter thanks.

***Authentic thanksgiving involves confession.*** Psalm 106 is one of a series of psalms that use similar language of thanksgiving. A refrain such as “Oh, give thanks” or “God's everlasting love” pulses through the retelling of God's care for God's people and all creation. In each of these psalms, however, the great works of God are contrasted with an honest confession of the unfaithfulness, the falling away, and the sinfulness of God's people. And yet there is thanksgiving, based in the fact that *God* remembers God's promise of mercy to all generations. God always calls people back even when they have gone astray and given into fear.

Thanksgiving then isn't about how good *we* are or how blessed we have been, or how well our country is doing. We give thanks because although we humans are so good at screwing things up, God doesn't give up on us. We give thanks that because we have received mercy we can offer and give mercy. Thanksgiving that doesn't acknowledge our complicity in the sin that surrounds us is not authentic thanksgiving. Expressions of thanks that confess and make a renewed commitment to following the path of Jesus, in all of our imperfections, becomes genuine thanksgiving. Authentic thanksgiving involves confession.

***There is no situation too dark in which to utter thanks.*** Last week when we reflected on the imprecatory psalms I mentioned that the setting for these words of anger and anguish were situations of grave suffering and injustice. Psalm 126 speaks out of one such setting – the time of the exile when citizens of Israel and Judah had been taken captive to Babylon. Psalm 126 is a homecoming song, a song of arrival and anticipation. It speaks in just a few verses in past,

present, and future tense all at the same time. God has restored the fortunes... O God, restore our fortunes. Our mouth was filled with laughter ... may those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Although things aren't yet fulfilled, restoration hasn't fully come to pass, these people can dream precisely because they never stopped giving thanks, even in their darkest hours. Thanksgiving is a way to hold on to a dream. Thanksgiving is a way to profess faith when it's hardest to trust and believe. I heard two expressions of thanksgiving in the darkness this past week.

The first was from our sister Terry Gerber. A number of you have not met Terry for she has needed skilled nursing care during the past couple years and hasn't been able to come to church. She has lived for over twenty years with a neurological condition that includes paralysis of the left side of her body. She is increasingly susceptible to infections, which have caused more frequent hospitalizations this past year, and her mind is not as clear as it once was. When a group of five of us went to visit and share in a time of Bible reflection with her this past Monday, she broke into a smile at our arrival. As we discussed Psalm 23 and the ways we have experienced God's "rod and staff comforting us," Terry was quick to give testimony.

For the 15 years that I have known Terry I have known her as a "pray-er." Unable to take part in many physical activities, she has always considered prayer to be her primary gift to others. As part of her prayer discipline she keeps a prayer journal. On Monday she told us: "I always start writing by giving thanks." Terry, no doubt, has her moments of lament, perhaps even imprecation when there is delayed response to her call light or she faces yet another meal of pureed foods and thickened liquids. But she always returns and begins again with thanksgiving.

The other expression of thanksgiving in the darkness that I heard this week was up at the 4<sup>th</sup> Precinct Police Station in north Minneapolis on Thursday evening. After several faith leaders spoke and led in prayer, Representative Ellison, having just come from visiting the Clarke family, was there to encourage the protestors and to let them know their vigilance for justice has had an effect. He named the demands of the group and the responses to those demands that have been forthcoming as a result. And then he paused and encouraged the crowd to acknowledge and thank persons like Mayor Hodges who have responded—even if not in the exact way or to the full degree that all would like to see. Representative Ellison was demonstrating the need to nurture thankfulness, which instills hope, even when the struggle is not yet over. He was giving thanks in the midst of darkness that had enveloped his own son, who on the previous day while protesting nonviolently, found himself in a hands-up position facing an intimidating policeman.

Dare we give thanks? Absolutely! Thanks that begins with confession, which opens us to God's mercy, and then holds a light of faith in the darkness.

*May those who sow in tears, reap with shouts of joy.*

*Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves. (Psalm 126:5-6).*

Give thanks abundantly!