

Holy Thursday

When my Grandma Turner died in Kansas City, I was in the seminary in St. Louis. Grandpa Turner had died before I was born, so she was my connection to ancestors on Dad's side of the family. My siblings don't remember this particular detail the same way, but I heard that the last one of us to visit Grandma in the hospital was one of my brothers. She was non-communicative, but at one point he heard her say these words: "But I do want to thank you for..." She never finished the sentence. Those were her last words.

I was 22 years old, but I thought how cool that would be if your last words before you die gave thanks. For that to happen, you'd have to make thanksgiving a way of life. You'd have to practice it every day. Now, we do. Many of us are grateful for the most important people in our lives, even if we do not always tell them. But we may practice other feelings every day: anger, resentment, pride, condescension. If your last words act as a signature on your life, you might not like to be remembered for harsh words you practiced so diligently every day that some of them slid out of your mouth with your final breath.

The verses to our responsorial tonight give thanks to God. They open with the question, "How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me?" We have nothing equivalent to offer back. Still, the first step is simply recognizing all that the Lord has done. Some people don't even get that far. They take their lives for granted and may even think the world owes them more. But once we realize our very life comes from God, then we can ask that beautiful question, "How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me?" The answer comes a few verses later: "A thanksgiving sacrifice I make."

The word "eucharist" comes from the Greek word for saying thanks. To celebrate the eucharist is to give thanks. In the preface tonight, you'll hear how right it is always and everywhere to give God thanks, for Christ "was the first to offer himself as the saving Victim, commanding us to make this offering as his memorial." He said, "Do this in memory of me," and that's what we do—not just in obedience, but in thanks. One way to practice a habit of thankfulness is to participate weekly in the eucharist. During the eucharistic prayer we can think specifically about all the reasons we have for giving thanks. What's on your list? Family? Friends? Home? Work? School? Health? Talents?

Psalms 116 makes a couple of other points. It prays, "Lord, your servant am I, the son of your handmaid." These words tell God, "You probably know my mother better than you know me. You liked her. Well, I'm your servant too." Then it also says, "How precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his faithful." How precious is the death of one who practiced the virtue of faith every day.

On Holy Thursday, these words make us think about Christ. He offered the sacrifice of thanksgiving. His death was precious in his Father's eyes. His mother was the handmaid of the Lord.

It sounded as if my grandmother never finished her last sentence: "But I do want to thank you for...." But maybe she did. Maybe that's the best way to give thanks: in silent praise because we can never repay the Lord for all his goodness—especially the goodness we share tonight: the Body and Blood of Christ.