

Hands of Praise - Thanksgiving Devotion

Bastian Fähnrich, November 2014

"Praise the Lord, o my soul, and don't forget the good that he has done." (Psalm 103:2)

"Do not work for food that perishes but for food that lasts for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set his seal on him." (John 6:27)

Dear friends,

thanks for coming with all the different kinds of food to today's Thanksgiving potluck. You have prepared the food for this joint meal. You have prepared it possibly with your own hands. Or you brought the food with your hands. Even if you came empty-handed: You are welcome to join in! We don't want to leave anyone out of this meal. Today we shall rejoice together and give thanks for everything that we have and are given to freely.

Preparing and bringing food with our hands lead me to ponder the *works of our hands*. Isn't it good and worthy of praise what kind of things we can make with our hands? We can do so much with our own hands and, especially, together with and for others.

For example, think about how many people or hands it takes to get food on the table. Let's think about a simple thing such as bread.

There is
the one gathering the seeds,
the one sowing the seeds,
the one taking care of the field,
the one forecasting the weather,
the one watering the plants,
the one harvesting the crops,
the one milling the grain,
the one packing the flour,
the one transporting it,
the one reselling and stocking it,
the one purchasing it,
the one baking bread out of it,

with the help of the ones
making up for
water,
heat,
electricity,
and so on
and on.

The one is many. Many little ones. We can barely do anything by ourselves alone.

And yet, if we think it through: Is it *really* us – the many little ones – making all the good and goods with our own hands?

If we believe in God as Christians do, then we know that there is the One, the One with a capital O. Likewise, there is the Maker, the Maker with a capital M.

As Christians we also believe that *it is* the One and the Maker *to* Whom we owe everything that we are,
everything that we have, and
everything that we can make
with our hands (or without these too).

The Bible reads in Psalm 90:17: "*The Lord our God establishes the works of our hands.*"

So, God is the One making everything work according to His good will. He is the Maker Who made our hands and wants us to use them for His purposes. We are – at most – little "ones" or helpers who are enabled by God to make good things for our own and other people's lives. *If* we can think of us as helpers at all:

For
how often do we refuse to lend a hand to others,
how many times do we tie and bind others' hands,
how often do we fold our hands to pray only for our needs and wants,
how many times do we cross our hands when we should open them for others, or
how often do we keep things in our own hands, instead of giving away, sharing with others?

We know, for example, that the food made on this earth would be sufficient to feed all the people living in the whole world. We would just have to distribute "our" food or any other good and goods freely to others. Jesus says to his believers (Matthew 10:8): "*Freely you have received; freely give.*"

Jesus spoke these words when sending out his disciples to proclaim the Kingdom of God to the Jews, and later to the Gentiles as well. When saying so, Jesus also told his disciples to do the same things for free and give the same gifts to people as he himself had done and given:
to heal the sick,
to clean the impure,
to drive out evil,
to feed the hungry, and
to share the good news.

Jesus asked his disciples to follow him in everything that he did and told. What does this mean to us, especially, to Christ's followers in today's world? It means to live our lives based on the example of Jesus, to live according to the good news and all the good that God has given freely and will still give to us and humankind – for free.

It also means to join in the good works following Jesus' example. It simply means, for example, "*to stretch out our hands*" to those in need just like Jesus and his disciples (Mark

1:41). Furthermore, it means to use not only our hands but *"our bodies as a living sacrifice"*, as the Bible tells in Romans 12:1. As we know, Jesus even sacrificed his life for us and the whole world. He went that far, and many followers of Christ went down that path as well. But probably we do not have to go *that* far in following Christ. Remember: We are little "ones", little helpers at most. God only knows. For us it may be sufficient to stretch out our hands and serve others like Jesus did, with the gifts and everything that we have freely received from God.

By stretching out our hands to others we may get surprised about what good we may sometimes get in return, simply by giving away. Here is a story I wish to share with you – I have adapted it from Internet sources. The story is entitled *"Lunch with God"*:

There once was a young boy who wanted to meet God. He assumed it was a long trip to where God lived, so one summer day he packed his suitcase with a few sandwiches and bottles of water, and he started his journey.

When he had gone a few streets from home, he met an old man. The old man was sitting on a bench in a park. It seemed to the young boy that the old man was resting there and listening to the birds in the trees.

The boy sat down next to him and opened his suitcase. He was about to take a drink from one of his water bottles, when he noticed that the old man looked hungry, so he offered him a sandwich.

The old man thankfully accepted it and smiled at the young boy. His smile was so incredible that the boy wanted to see it again, so he offered him a whole bottle of water and another sandwich.

Once again, the old man smiled at the young boy. The boy was delighted! They sat there for quite some time of the afternoon enjoying the food and drink and smiling, but they never said a word.

As it grew dark, the young boy realised how tired he was, and he got up to leave, but before he had gone more than a few steps, he turned around, and ran back to the old man, and gave him a hug. The old man gave him his biggest smile ever.

When the boy reached his home a short time later and opened the door, his mother was surprised by the look of joy on his face. She asked her son: "What did you do today that made you so happy?"

The child replied: "I had lunch with God." But before his mother could respond, he added: "You know what? He's got the most beautiful smile I've ever seen!"

Meanwhile, the old man, also radiant with joy, went away and headed for another place, a shelter home for homeless people. The helper there was stunned by the expression of joy on the old man's face and asked: "Martin, what did you do today that made you so happy?" He replied: "I ate sandwiches in the park with God."

But before the helper responded, the old man added: "You know, He's much younger than I expected."

So far so good: This was the story I wanted to share with you.

Dear friends. Soon we will be serving the potluck food to each other, the food that you and I have prepared or brought with our own hands. We will share all together in today's meal. We have possibly invited other people to it, and thus we may count on guests who also came along to partake of all the good being served, just as the young boy and the old man in the park.

Some guests may have come with empty hands to our Thanksgiving potluck. This is perfectly fine. That's how it's supposed to be, as Jesus once told at an event where he took part in a meal, and to which he was invited by Pharisees, Jewish teachers of God's law. Jesus said to them (Luke 14:12-14): *"When you give a lunch or a dinner, don't invite only your friends, brothers, relatives, and rich neighbours. At another time they will pay you back by inviting you to eat with them. Instead, when you give a lunch or dinner, invite the poor, the crippled, and the blind. Then you will have great blessings, because these people cannot pay you back. They have nothing. But God will reward you at the time when all godly people rise from death."*

In addition, Jesus told a parable of a king who asked his servants to *"go out into the streets and gather all the people they could find"* for a banquet that the king had prepared for his guests (Matthew 22:1-14; Luke 14:1-27, see also Luke 5:29-32, and James 2).

Isn't that wonderful? The same applies to us and other people. All of us are guests invited today for this particular meal, and in addition to that, we are invited into God's kingdom.

However, I wonder whether there are people sitting on a park bench right now, here in Oulu, probably freezing due to the coldness, looking for someone stretching out a hand to them, inviting them into a warm room like this for a proper meal. Perhaps there are also people searching for God, out there, like the young boy in the story, or in here, in our midst.

Anyway. We can further think about these things during our meal in a few minutes, or at a later time. But let's take the time think about it at some time. For the time being, welcome again – everyone – to our Thanksgiving potluck!

But before that, let's give thanks for what we shall receive and give away as a *good* and free *food* gift today.

Let's give also thanks for all the *good* things that we have freely received in the past year, and that we have given away for free or that we still may give away freely,
today and
tomorrow and
until the end of our lives on this earth.

Let's give also thanks for all the *bad* things that we have received or that we possibly will receive in our lives, for sometimes the *bad* things may turn out to be *good* for us, even if this

were hard to believe. And sometimes – or in fact anytime – we may simply leave the *bad* things into the hands of God. He will take care of them, and of us as well.

Dear friends. By giving *good* things freely away out of our own hands to others, and by leaving the *bad* things into God's hands, we may find that our hands are suddenly free to be lifted up in praise. We have received hands of praise to give our thanks to God and each other.

Let's end this devotion by lifting up our hands of praise in song and in prayer. We will first sing our praises, and then Johnny Kleman will lead us into prayer. And eventually we may enjoy the good food served by us today. And all the other good as well, the good that God and we are ready to share.

Amen.