

A Mountaintop Thanksgiving

November 22, 2001

Three weeks ago I was vacationing south of Salzburg, Austria. Salzburg, you recall, is where the Von Trapp family lived and where “The Sound of Music” was filmed. Whenever I would step outside my room, I couldn’t help but imagine Julie Andrews up on the mountainside singing “The Hills Are Alive with the Sound of Music.”

“Praise the Lord, for it is good to sing praises to our God; for it is pleasant and a song of praise is fitting.” (Psalm 147:1)

Most of us have been singing thanks to God for many years. His hand has generously given us so, so many things. A pastor told me that a farmer was complaining to him recently about a sore throat. When the pastor expressed his sympathy, the farmer waved it off. “Ah, it’s nothing,” he said. “I just had the air conditioning set too cold in the combine.” Oh, has His hand given us so many things! He’s blessed us with big things, combines and air-conditioning, “house and home, fields and cattle,” and little things too. Those of us with sensitive souls have also sung praise for little things, like “rain drops on roses and whiskers on kittens, bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens, brown-paper packages tied up with strings....” For things big and small, it is good that you and I through the years have sung songs of thanksgiving. *“It is pleasant and a song of praise is fitting.”*

This Thanksgiving is different, however. Just as they promised us, nothing has been the same since September 11. We’ve been painfully reminded that there’s more to think about than things. “He who dies with the most toys wins?” I don’t think so. We’ve been taught anew that life and safety and righteousness are far more important than things. Yes, things are different this Thanksgiving. Do you remember the start of “The Sound of Music,” a wide camera shot zooms in on the face of Julie Andrews? This Thanksgiving we are thankful for faces.

- The faces of firefighters...how we’ve taken them for granted for so many years.
- The faces of the police...they’re on our side, even when they pull us over for speeding.
- The faces of our military personnel... I was in Washington’s Reagan airport Friday and I was thankful to see the serious faces of National Guard members toting machine guns.
- The face of the president...politics aside, we are thankful that he is a godly man.
- We are thankful to see new faces this Thanksgiving, the faces of Afghan women, faces that had been veiled by the chauvinistic insanities of fundamentalist men.

Look around. There are faces at home, at work, at school, and at church that have been taken for granted too many times. Each face is so much like yours, showing smiles or shedding tears, hiding hopes or fears. Sometimes our faces open up in complete honesty to one another. Other times, sadly, our faces hide the deceits of our hearts. What is it that's so gripping about the faces of people fleeing the World Trade Center, the faces grieving over flight 587? They're etched in our memories because they reflect our own deep emotions about living and about dying, about security and fear, about righteousness and chaos. You know, don't you? The faces in your life are more important than things.

There is one more face among us that must be mentioned. A student of mine, Paul Buelow, passed along a good story. Writing in "Christianity Today," Anne Ortlund says, "A young pastor friend has...been through the trial of his life. When I saw him recently, he asked me, 'What do you do when God doesn't say yes—doesn't give it, doesn't make it happen?' Then he answered his own question: 'Through agony I've gotten to know God better; I love him more.' He showed me a piece of paper he keeps in his wallet. It says, 'Look to His face, not to His hand.'" ("My Heart Sings," Christianity Today, Vol. 41, No. 7)

Mr. Buelow commented, "When we focus on God's hand we are simply looking for the next handout, but if we look to His face we see the caring and concern of a loving Father. The very one who sent His only Son to earth to bear the same afflictions we do but to earn for us the greatest gift – the right to call on God as our Father."

Where does God show us His face? It is Jesus Christ, the most important face among us. *"For God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6).*

Jesus' face is like ours in so many ways. It shed tears when Lazarus died but He put joy on the faces of Mary and Martha when He raised their brother. He turned his face toward the wounds of so many, sometimes healing them literally, and other times, as so often in our lives, leaving the thorn in the flesh but sustaining and strengthening us with His everlasting arms. His face has a way of affecting our faces. When we share hope and encouragement with one another, it is because He has done that for us in a way that only He can do. While Jesus is one of us and that gives us sympathy when we are suffering, He is also able to heal the brokenhearted and bind up our wounds because His is the face of God. That's why it is good that we sing thanks for His face among us.

"It is good to sing praises to our God; for it is pleasant and a song of praise is fitting. He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds" (Psalm 147:1-3).

One more thing needs to be emphasized. Singing thanks to God is a fine thing to do. It is, in fact, commanded to us. *"Oh, give thanks unto the Lord" (Psalm 136:1).* However, thanking God for all that we have, big things like combines, small things like raindrops on roses, and even thanking God for the faces in our daily lives does not make us Christian. What makes a Christian is repentance. If things are significantly different

since September 11th it should not only be due to our realization that faces are more important than things but because we have been taught again that the Savior's face is only truly known through repentance for our sins.

In 1863 President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a national day of Thanksgiving. Here is part of what he said that day. "It is the duty of nations as well as of men to owe their dependence upon the overruling power of God to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations are blessed whose God is the Lord.

"We know that by His divine law, nations, like individuals, are subject to punishments and chastisements in this world. May we not justify fear that that the awful calamity of civil war, which now desolates the land, may be a punishment inflicted upon us for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole people?"

"We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven; we have been preserved these many years in peace and prosperity; we have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand, which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us, and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us."

"You have said, 'Seek My face.' My heart says to you, 'Your face, Lord, do I seek'" (Psalm 27:8). That can make this a mountaintop thanksgiving for you.

My friend Dennis Riggs tells me that a few years ago Julie Andrews visited Salzburg for the first time since shooting "The Sound of Music." She revisited the various movie locations, the monastery, the mansion, and the cemetery. She also revisited the mountainside where the opening scene had been shot. She was so overcome with emotion that she spontaneously burst into song, "The hills are alive with the sound of music." At just that moment there appeared on the crest of the hill a group of Japanese tourists. What do you think that they did? No doubt they took photographs! They also assumed that Julie Andrews is always there singing "The Hills Are Alive with the Sound of Music."

Let's always have our thoughts on high. *"Seek the things that are above"* (Colossians 3:1). Fill the hills and the valleys with the sound of your thanksgivings, for *"It is good to sing praises to our God; for it is pleasant and a song of praise is fitting. He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds."* Focus your holiday on faces, especially on His face. Amen.

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