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“The Simple Witness of a Table Grace”

A sermon by Wallace M. Alston, Jr.

Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year C)

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Ezekiel 34:11-16, 23-24; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17

“Lord, make us grateful for all your mercies, and add your blessing to this food we are about to eat. Amen.”

“Bless us, O Lord, in blessing Thee, as we receive Thy gift of daily bread, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

“Lord Jesus, be our holy guest,
our morning joy, our evening rest;
and with our daily bread impart
your love and peace to every heart.”

“Bless, O Lord, these gifts, and sanctify them unto this holy use, that by them we may be fed unto everlasting life of soul and body; through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

“For health and strength, and daily bread, we give Thee thanks, O Lord.”

“Blessed are you, O Lord our God, ruler of the universe, for you give us food to sustain our lives and make our hearts glad. Amen.”

The saying of a blessing at mealtime is a Christian practice that bears its own simple witness to some of the profound convictions that daily garrison us against temptations to triviality and embolden us to assert that we are more than we sometimes appear to be. It is a habit that many of us formed in childhood under the influence of a Christian home ... a tradition that we have carried into our own lives and families without much thought or analysis. We do not always say a table grace when we are in a public place, and sometimes when we are alone or in a relaxed gathering of family and friends, we simply forget to do so. But for those of us who have been nurtured by this practice since childhood, when, for whatever reason, a table grace is omitted from our mealtime ritual, there comes that uncomfortable moment just before eating when we do not know quite what to say or do. There is an instinct that something is missing, something for which "Bon Appetit" is no substitute, and it is "the simple witness of a table grace."

The story is told of a Danish village church where there was once a whitewashed spot on the wall before which people would bow each time they entered. No one knew why they bowed at that spot. They did so because people had done so for 300 years. Then one day, when the church was being renovated, someone scraped the whitewash off the wall and found underneath that spot a lovely picture of the Madonna and Child. Once people were moved to reverence by a lovely icon of faith, which over time had been lost to view. Now all that was left was an empty rite that would soon become extinct.

This morning I want to look beneath the practice of saying a blessing at mealtime in an effort to uncover some of the convictions which initially gave rise to this practice and may yet possess the power to nourish people as they go about their daily round. After all, the practice of saying grace before meals speaks volumes about who we are and how we view the world. The old Scottish divine Alexander Whyte once declared that there was no more significant difference between human beings and brute beasts than that, while dogs and pigs attack their food with greedy and unreflecting taste, human beings will often be observed bowing their heads for a moment before

beginning to eat ... and in that little inhibition, said Whyte, in that brief moment of reverent reflection, our sole human dignity resides. So what is the simple witness of a table grace?

1. *First, the table grace bears witness from generation to generation, and from faith to faith, to the conviction that God is the Author and Giver of life, and that what God authors and gives to us is good.*

“Lord God, by whose creation I was given the gift of sight, grant that I may see not only with the eyes of my head but also with the eyes of my heart, that I may perceive the goodness of all that I behold and receive at thy hand, and glorify thee, Creator of all, who art blessed forevermore. Amen.”

Now, it is not self-evident that God created the world. The Christian doctrine of creation is neither science nor history. It is a metaphorical way of trying to speak the truth about the world. It affirms that the world is not all there is, that there is an Intelligence and a Will that transcend the world, the signs of which may be seen through eyes of faith. This Intelligence and Will, Christians believe, not only fashioned all being and existence, but guided the history of Israel, spoke through the prophets, were embodied in Jesus Christ, and now are the realities with which you and I daily have to do.

Likewise, it is not self-evident that the world is good. This, too, is an article of faith. As a matter of fact, the conviction that the world is not good but evil is one of the most persistent in all human thought. And sometimes the irrational, the ironic, the absurd facts of life seem to bear that out. People regularly and sometimes painfully disappoint us. Nature can be so terribly ruthless as to claim the life of a young woman who has only begun to live. A shooter takes the lives of little children in Sandy Hook. A terrorist kills and maims the innocent in Brussels. Karl Barth, the great theologian of the 20th century, called this “the shadow-side of creation,” for which, let’s be honest, there is no adequate explanation, only the stubborn conviction that even the shadow-side is within reach of God’s good, gracious, and healing hand.

When we bow to give thanks for what we have received, there is a sense in which we utter our great “Nevertheless!” by taking our stand on the conviction that life is the good gift of a gracious Giver, who can be trusted, in the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, “to provide [us] with all things necessary for body and soul.” That is the simple witness of a table grace.

2. Moreover, when we bow before eating and cover the mealtime experience with a table grace, we confess that our times ... past, present, and future ... are in God's hands.

“O Thou that givest food to all flesh, which feedeth the young ravens that cry unto Thee, and hast nourished us from our youth up: fill our hearts with good and gladness and establish our hearts with Thy grace. Amen.”

The author of the book of Revelation speaks of God in three tenses when he speaks of the God “who is and who was and who is to come” (1:4). But this morning, as we mark the 100th anniversary of worship in this sanctuary, we think particularly of the God who was. So much of the Bible has to do with the past, and with what we are to make of the present and future in light of the past. No people on earth has been more conscious of their past as were the Hebrew people tutored by the prophets, and the reason was that they believed God to have been the principal actor throughout it all. “We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us, what deeds thou didst perform in their days, in the days of old” (Ps. 44) ... and so on. The Bible, from beginning to end, is convinced that the God who is and the God who will be is none other than the God who was.

You and I are creatures of time. We live in time, but the only bit of it over which we have any control is that thin winged moment we call the present. And even then, who knows? What we do know is that we are quite helpless as regards the past. When earth was without form and void, you and I were not there. When Israel came out of Egypt, we were not there. When a carpenter's

son was crucified on Calvary's hill, regardless of the familiar hymn, we were not there. When empire succeeded empire in the ancient world, when the followers of Luther and Calvin set whole cultures in motion, when the country in which we live became a nation, we were not there. Yet these events of the past and many others like them have fixed our identity, in a sense, marking the bounds of our habitation and the narrow limits of our opportunity.

When in 1871 the First Presbyterian Church of Durham was organized, and in 1915 when this building was built; when the three mission groups of First Church, that grew up around textile mills, became the Second, now the Trinity Avenue Presbyterian Church in 1902, Fuller Memorial in 1909, and Blacknall Memorial in 1916, we were not there. When this church undertook a ministry to soldiers in the war years; when in 1954 the church overturned the Presbytery in favor of the ordination of women and Margaret Newton was elected an elder; when "the prophet's chamber" housed some of the great preachers of the day; when the apartment on the third floor was graced by Clara Matthis and the people were fed by Marie Trueitt; when the church was jolted into awareness by a brick thrown through the church house window during the rioting and curfew of 1969, sending the PNC home in total darkness; when the Session determined that the church would be open and welcoming to people of all races ... you and I may or may not have been there, but we believe that God was there, working out God's purposes in that time and in this place.

If we did not believe this, if we could not look back and somehow discern God's guiding and correcting hand in our lives, if we regarded the past as merely a haphazard succession of discrete events, just "one damned thing after another," without plot or plan, our lives would be robbed of meaning. But if we believe in a God who not only is but who also was, if the God who is with us in this sanctuary this morning is also the God who was, doing with us and accomplishing in us today things that are consistent with what God did and accomplished in the past, then we have a lineage, something to hold onto, come what may.

By the way, I know a little girl in Maine who calls her grandmother “Allstate.” When I asked her why, she said, “We all call her ‘Allstate,’ because when you are with her, you are always in good hands.” That is also the simple witness of a table grace.

3. Yet again, when we bow before eating and thank God for our food, we confess that we are dependent upon God for all that we are and all that we have.

In the biblical tradition, one of the primary metaphors for this dependence is that of being fed. “I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them and be their shepherd.” (Ezek. 34:23).

“Almighty God, who providest for us in all things, nourish our souls with the bread of life, and our bodies with the food we are about to eat; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

A great theologian of the 19th century believed that faith could best be understood as the experience of absolute dependence upon God.

“God is great, God is good,
Let us thank God for our food.
By God’s hand we must be fed,
Give us, Lord, our daily bread.”

In the middle of the 5th century, the great Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, was drawn into controversy concerning the nature of the church by an outstanding Christian layman named Pelagius. Pelagius was a great hulk of a man, keen of intellect, powerful of personality, who, after gaining prominence in the church, sought to transform it into a community of the moral elite. Pelagius believed that moral and spiritual perfection was not only possible for a person, but obligatory. We have no excuse for our sin, he said. God made us to be perfect and God would punish us if we were not. But Pelagius was living proof that our worst defects are often the defects of our highest qualities.

It was at this point that Augustine stepped in. To him it seemed as if the claims of Pelagius were both wrong and impractical. “Many sins are committed through pride,” to be sure, said Augustine, “but not all happen proudly ... they happen so often by ignorance, by human weakness; many are committed by men weeping and groaning in their distress.” Augustine thought of the church, not as a community of the moral elite, but as an “inn for convalescents.” He was convinced that the church existed not to judge but to heal, that it must accept with grace and understanding the slow and erratic healing processes at work in all sorts and conditions of people. The recent papal exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, reflects a similar understanding of the church.

Peter Brown, in his biography of Augustine, commented that the difference between the two men could be seen in their differing views of babies. Pelagius was contemptuous of babies. He did not think babies provided an apt paradigm for a person’s relation to God. Christians were not called to be “children” of God. They were called to be mature and independent adults, able to go out into the world and lead an exemplary existence.

Augustine, on the other hand, was fascinated by babies. The extent of their helplessness had grown on him, such that he likened his own relation to God as that of a baby feeding at its mother’s breast, utterly dependent, intimately involved in all the good and evil that might come from this, the only source of life. The experience of absolute dependence, not unlike that of a baby at its mother’s breast, became normative for Christian understanding of our relation to God. Thus, at mealtime, people have been heard to pray:

“Here, a little child I stand,
Heaving up my either hand:
Cold as paddocks though they be,
Here I lift them up to Thee,
For a benison to fall
On our meat and on our all.”

4. Finally, when we pause for prayer before eating, we confess that gratitude is not only the dominant theme in authentic Christian piety, but also the motive of Christian action in the world.

In this as in all else, Jesus has given us the perfect paradigm. His whole demeanor was one of gratitude to God, just as before partaking of his last meal with the twelve “he took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them...” (Mk. 14:22-23). I feel quite sure they did not understand what he was doing at the time, but after he was gone it came back to them, and they kept on doing it, breaking bread together, and whenever they did it, they felt certain that Jesus was not far away from them. Sometimes in their attempt to follow him, they would grow weary and doubtful and dim-sighted just as we do. Sometimes Jesus seemed like a distant memory. But then they would come together and repeat this simple meal in his name. And the reality of it all would come back to them. As the gospel of Luke records, “He became known to them in the breaking of bread.” And they were profoundly thankful and called the meal “Eucharist,” gratitude.

And yet, gratitude always moves beyond feeling and ritual when it is genuine. Emotion that exhausts itself in sacred rites without the impulse to action is not only sterile but ultimately insincere. Thus we sing, “Savior, like a shepherd lead us”; thus we pray:

“Give us grateful hearts, O God, for all your mercies,
and make us mindful of the needs of others.”

So they asked him good questions, those in Jesus’ parable who sat on the King’s right hand. “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? When was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” The answer they expected, of course, was “Never!” But the King answered and said, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:37ff). In other words, Christ has given to

“the least of these” ... Moslem refugees from Syria; the transgendered, whose humanity is currently under assault; children of the undocumented who are not rapists; the hungry and homeless, you know who they are ... Christ has given to “the least of these” who are members of [his] family ... his proxy, such that what I would happily have done for him, I am now to do for them. That, too, is the simple witness of a table grace.

The Prayer of General Thanksgiving says it all, I think, and its familiar words will offer us both a faithful summary and a fitting conclusion.

Almighty God, Father of all mercies: We Thine unworthy servants do give Thee most humble and hearty thanks; For all Thy goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all people. We bless Thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; But above all for Thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And, we beseech Thee; give us that due sense of all Thy mercies; That our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful; And that we show forth Thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives; By giving up ourselves to Thy service; And by walking before Thee in holiness and righteousness all our days; Through Jesus Christ our Lord; To whom, with Thee and the Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory; World without end. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Wallace M. Alston, Jr. served as pastor of FPC from 1969-1974. He also served Presbyterian churches in Wadesboro, NC; Auburn, AL; and Princeton, NJ. In 1996 he was named director of the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, NJ, where he also served as a consultant and administrator to its Pastor-Theologian Program. He was honorably retired from the ministry in 2005. A prolific author, his work has been featured in publications such as The Duke Divinity School Review and Theology Today. He is the author of Church of the Living God: A Reformed Perspective and The Power to Comprehend With All The Saints: the Formation and Practice of the Pastor-Theologian with Cynthia A. Jarvis. A graduate of Emory University, he earned his B.D. and Ph.D. degrees from Union Theological Seminary. He currently resides in Castine, ME, with his wife, Alice.