

Giving Thanks
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
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Philippians 4:4–9

Like no other year, we are facing the holiday season with a sense of foreboding and dread. Not the usual dread as to who will say what or who will offend someone, but who will we see and who will we miss. We know there will be empty places at our table this year. And many of us will be alone, not able to gather like we are used to. Today I want us to think of how we are we going to give thanks in this season of thanksgiving when we cannot assume that all is well or that we have been blessed with such abundant bounty. And the concerns from health, to employment, and to our nation are taking up our waking hours.

For words better than I can give, I turn to the Apostle Paul who had his own set of challenges and hardships He, too, had the concerns of his health, his own economic stability and he lived with the continual threat of imprisonment or worse from a government that was hostile to his words. Listen to the words he gives the Church in Philippi:

Philippians 4:4-9

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure,

whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

This is the Word of the Lord.

The act of giving thanks carries with it some complexity. The story in the bible about Jesus healing the ten lepers and only one in ten thought to stop and return and express his gratitude to Jesus. That is not a high statistic but it is realistic. Why is it so difficult to say thank you? I would guess that each of us at one time or another was in the 90% where we could not bring ourselves to show our gratitude.

We embrace the concept of giving thanks and then do everything we can to avoid it. This week I waded into the murky waters of giving thanks. How difficult it is for us to live in a state of gratitude. A way to start is to shift the focus from giving thanks to thankful living.

I don't know about you but I was taught from the time I could talk to say thank you. I was marched back to a neighbor if I neglected to thank them for something. As we raised our children sometimes "now what do you say?" came out of my mouth before they even had a chance to say thank you.

Polite society expects it and yet as those eight letters roll off our lips, they can be far removed from authentic thankful living. We embrace the concept but certainly balk at the fulfillment of it.

Connecting with another in the state of thankfulness makes us vulnerable. We spend a lifetime protecting ourselves from being

weak. We fear not being able to meet our own basic needs. That fear is even more prevalent with us today because so much is out of our control.

We are much more comfortable doing the kindness than receiving it. Yet if we have never been on the receiving end how do we truly know gratitude? If we have never been at the mercy of another's kindness, how can we live in a place of thankfulness?

We work hard to make sure we don't need help from others if at all possible. How many times has the response come when you offer "Can I do anything?"

"Oh no, we are fine. Thanks for asking." Are they are we really grateful or are they uncomfortable that someone might think they need help so they just want them to go away.

It is so refreshing when the response is, "Why as a matter of fact there is something you can do." And it is a task that I can easily do!

My husband Gregg often reminds me, "It increases people's self-esteem when you ask them for help." I agree but I also think he is giving me a way to circumvent my vulnerability so that I can think by saying yes, I am really helping the one offering me assistance!

This year in particular I realize that our losses are taking center stage. We are all experiencing things we can't do. because of the pandemic. Things we can't talk about because of our divided state of politics, and above all things we are worried about, our health our finances, our planet. That is a heavy burden to carry. This year maybe we need to pay close attention to the things that give us peace and joy so that we can live into thankfulness. That way the

losses do not consume us. Sometimes we need to find the joy as trite or as small as it may be.

I have served 19 churches as an interim, or what is now called a transitional pastor. I have served churches whose lives were in total chaos. One of the more challenging churches I served as an interim associate was in a large suburban church outside Chicago. The pastor and the Session were at odds with each other. Neither were ready to budge. The presbytery was called in and held a congregational vote in which 45% of the over 1000 members attending wanted the pastor to leave. It was a terrible split and the pastor dug in. He refused to go. His supporters rallied around him. There were signs and pickets on Sunday morning. They created T-shirts with his picture on it saying this man was their pastor. They threatened to interrupt worship. Friends not only stopped talking to each other they stopped doing business with each other and became outright hostile to each other.

Every Sunday I would get up and go to worship God in a volatile atmosphere, not knowing what was going to happen. It was one of the darkest times in my ministry. One Sunday morning as I walked from the parking lot to the church doors, girding myself up to face who knows what, for the first time I noticed the sidewalk that led from the parking lot to the street. It consisted of three cement sections. But the sections were not laid out on square with one after the other, like a typical sidewalk. The sections were set off from each other one to the left and then one to the right. The cement sections were placed slightly off. Some street engineer set an interesting pattern from the parking lot to the street. It gave an ordinary sidewalk a little pizzazz. It was not what I expected. I stopped and gave a little laugh at that bit of whimsy that I had never noticed before. I did a little hopscotch following the skewed

cement path. As I did, it caused me to enter the church which was filled with tension, with a smile and a spring in my step.

Such a silly thing, such a little thing. But I am so grateful for whoever was responsible for putting the sidewalk in an unusual way that caused me joy in a dark time.

Being grateful takes some work when the list of what is not right with the world seems longer and more dire than what is right with the world. Sometime we have to go looking for the whimsy, the spark of joy, the beauty that will lift us up from the darkness.

One of the favorite Thanksgiving hymns is Now Thank We all our God. The words were written Martin Rinckart. Rinckart lived during the thirty years war in the 1500 and 1600's. As a result of the war, there were countless refugees coming to the city of Eilenberg. Not only was the war going on, there was also the threat of the plague that was ravaging through Europe. As people poured in to the city they had to contend with the plague. Rinckart was the last surviving minister of that city. He was performing 50 funerals a day and he was using up his own resources in helping with the refugees. And from such decimation, he writes the words to the hymn.

“Now thank we all our God with heart and hand and voices. Who wonderous things hath done, in whom the world rejoices?”

Imagine the backdrop at the time he was writing this thanksgiving hymn: carts taking away of bodies due to the plague, people wandering about being displaced from the war. If there was ever a depressing scene it would have been that. And out of that landscape out of his giving all that he had, comes the words of thanksgiving. It is a testimony of thankful living as this hymn has survived through the centuries.

This year, let us reflect in living thankfully. And when the worries and concerns start to pile up and overwhelm us, look for the moment the little things that bring a spark of joy and will lift up our hearts. Look for the things that under other times we simply walk by.

Can we live thankfully in the reality of our lives? Not only in the successes and triumphs, but also when we are laid low. How deep does our giving thanks go when we list just the highlights of life? How much closer we are to thankful living when we can experience gratitude to God out of the depths.

Paul wrote, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” This year let us try some thankful living. Amen.