

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Rouch
November 19, 2023
Philippians 4:4–7, Colossians 3:12–17

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Calm us now, O God, into a quietness that heals and listens. By your Spirit, open our hearts to the balm of your Word. Speak to us in clear tones so that we might feel our spirits leap for joy, increase with hope, and expand with thanksgiving as your resurrection witnesses. Amen.

Philippians 4:4-7

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.

Colossians 3:12-17

Therefore, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual

songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

As I mentioned last week, the writer, Anne Lamott, has a short book about prayer entitled, “Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers.” She starts the book by saying, “I do not know much about God and prayer, but I have come to believe, over the past twenty-five years, that there’s something to be said about keeping prayer simple. Help. Thanks. Wow.” Last week we talked about the prayer of “Help.” This week, we look at the prayer of “Thanks,” or “Thank You.”

Lamott says the prayer of “Thank you, God” or “Thanks,” may come in a variety of ways.¹ Often it may come as a rush of relieve when we have evaded some kind of hardship or tragedy. But it might also be for the smaller things. It might be as simple as giving thanks that you saw the highway patrol car in the median in just enough time to slow your speed, so they didn’t pull you over. Or maybe it’s the small thank you in the early morning hours when you realize your partner set up the coffee and the timer the night before so all you need to do is get your favorite mug and pour a cup. Thank you.

Then there are the bigger rushes of relief that come with an, “Oh God, thank you. Thank you.” Thank you that it’s not cancer. Thank you, the brakes held. Thank you for the safe delivery and a healthy baby. Thank you that the scan is clear. Thank you they went to rehab. Lamott says, “Gratitude runs the gamut from shaking your head saying, ‘Thanks, wow, I appreciate it so much,’ for your continued health, or a good day at work, or the first blooms of the daises in the public park, to saying, ‘Thanks, that’s a relief,’ when it’s not the transmission, or an abscess, or an audit notice from the IRS. ‘Thanks’ can be the recognition that you have been blessed mildly, or with a feeling as intense as despair at the

miracle of having been spared. You say

Thankyouthankyouthankyouthankyou: My wife is going to live. We get to stay in this house. They found my son: he's in jail, but he's alive; we know where he is and he's safe for the night."ⁱⁱ

To be human is to experience the highs and the lows of life. The world keeps spinning and we experience both the painful and the beautiful things of life. Hard and easy. Amazing and devastating. To make it through, requires an orientation of heart toward God, a tuning toward gratitude and thanksgiving. It requires practice and intentionality to remind ourselves of the things for which we can be grateful.

In the reading from Colossians, Paul uses the metaphor of putting on clothes as a reminder of this intentionality that can lead to a life centered in thankfulness.ⁱⁱⁱ When we get dressed each day, we begin with what? Our underwear, what used to be called "foundation garments." When Paul talks about compassion and humility, he is talking about the foundation garments of life, because those character traits are fundamental to human relationships. They summarize how we feel deep down inside about each other and about ourselves.

Putting on compassion means that we feel with each other. Compassion is a "tenderness of heart." Humility is how we feel about ourselves, not negative feelings about ourselves, but a lack of focus on ourselves. Humility will keep us from insisting on our own way, our own rights, our own agenda. Without compassion and humility, human relationships don't work.

Next, Paul calls us to put on the basic work clothes of the Christian life, kindness and gentleness. Those are the jeans and sweatshirts we wear in the everyday world. Kindness means, at least, to be courteous and considerate of other people. That's not very fancy or sexy, but I believe

simple human kindness will go a long way to do more to demonstrate the life-changing work of Christ than almost anything else.

Kindness can be seen in the goodness that is for the well-being of others. One writer comments that, “The writers of scripture defined kindness as the virtue of the person whose neighbor’s good is as dear as his own.”^{iv} In every Psalm where the King James Version refers to the “kindness” of God, the Revised Standard Version translates it as “steadfast love.”

We put on gentleness because we are all so fragile that we need gentle treatment. In a violent world, the children of God must wear gentleness like old worn-out jeans.

Then, each day we must put on the shoes of patience. The world is filled with problems, but problems become splits, divisions, and warfare when we run out of patience with the problem. So, Paul says, put on the shoes of patience and keep walking with each other, even when it feels like an endurance race. And just because we humans can so easily annoy each other, we need to carry a full pocket of forgiveness.

The final article of clothing Paul mentions is the overcoat of love; “and over all these virtues put on love, which binds them together in perfect unity.” Indeed, we can’t and won’t put on any of the other articles of Christian clothing without love.

Once we are clothed with these things, once we have the intentional practice of these attributes, Colossians instructs us, “with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.” When we practice compassion, humility, kindness, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and love the only response is gratitude and to sing. In turn, when we can orient our hearts toward gratitude, it allows us to better practice acts of compassion, humility, kindness, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and love. Those acts fuel thankfulness and an attitude and

orientation of thankfulness fuel those acts. One is an inner reality and orientation, the others outwards manifestations and actions of that inner orientation of gratitude.

If an essential prayer is to give thanks, I am also reminded that there is a familiar phrase that “to sing is to pray twice.” The Psalms, the song book of scripture, many times call us to make a joyful noise to the Lord and to lift our praise to God. To sing and be thankful. In a world when there are so many other things that pull our focus, a reminder to reorient our lives, in praise, toward God is a powerful thing. A reminder to reorient to the Lord whose character is marked by “steadfast love,” “graciousness,” and “faithfulness,” is something that is essential.

There have been many studies that show the benefits of expressing gratitude and thankfulness. Expressing gratitude and thanks has real impacts on physical and emotional health. It has been shown to enhance empathy and reduce aggression. It builds self-esteem and increases our mental fortitude.

Perhaps some of you have heard of the practice of a gratitude journal. A gratitude journal is a practice where you spend a few moments each day, typically at the end of each day, where you write down a few things for which you are thankful. It might be that there are some days when it is easy to come up with things for which you are grateful. There may be an embarrassment of riches. There may be some days when it is more difficult to recall those things for which you are grateful. But one thing I have heard from folks who use this practice, is that the more you do it, the easier it is to find things for which to be thankful – even on the not-so-good days. It’s almost as if once you start looking for things to be grateful for, you see them everywhere.

Orienting or reorienting our lives toward praise and gratitude is not about seeing the world in a Pollyannaish way, or to put on rose-colored glasses and refusing to see pain and anguish in the world. It is not about seeing the broken aspects of the world, but it is about helping us from letting the broken and painful parts of the world overtake us. It is about gathering the energy and the fortitude to be able to live and move and have our being in a broken and painful world to make it less broken and painful.

Anne Lamott says, “it is easy to thank God for life when things are going well. But life is much bigger than we give it credit for, and much of the time it is harder than we would like.”^v And sometimes gratitude can be a bit of a stretch for us, but if we practice at it, it can become a habit. And if it can become a habit, grace will enter in. In those difficult moments when we remind ourselves to turn toward God, Lamott says, “grace can be the experience of a second wind, when even though what you want is clarity and resolution, what you get is stamina and poignancy and the strength to hang on.”^{vi}

As one preacher says, “Making a joyful noise to the Lord, when the world around us seems hellbent on destruction and pain, is a counter cultural act of defiance. When we can find joy and praise in the face of death, loss, and human-caused pain, we turn, we re-orient the world toward God. We claim that death will not win. We sing hope to a world hearing despair.”^{vii}

As people of faith, we are called to be oriented toward praise, hope, and thanksgiving. Toward nothing less than grace. So, we make a joyful noise, even when we know things are not as they should be, in hope that our work together will give us the strength and will to continue to work toward God’s kingdom of justice and righteousness.

Gratitude and praise are an act of resistance. The Psalms calls us to laugh out loud and shout for joy. No matter if, and maybe especially if, nothing about our life or this world seems worth singing about.

I was reminded this week of an experience I had watching someone sing with joy even when there didn't seem much to sing about. About 20 years ago, in my final year in seminary, I was an intern at Presbyterian Homes right here in Bloomington, and one of my supervisors was Janet Shannon. Each week, there was (and is) a worship service at the chapel. (I will be leading the service today). Janet's mom was a resident at Presbyterian Homes and was in the 24-hour care facility. Janet's mom didn't talk much and was fairly non-responsive, and her memory was inconsistent because of dementia. In the many times I had met her previously, I couldn't recall ever hearing a word come out of her mouth. On this particular day, when Janet was leading the worship service, she rolled her mother's wheelchair up to the piano, and set an old worn copy of a hymnal in front of her. Janet opened the hymnal, and her mother took a look at the page, and then began to play and albeit in a feeble voice, she sang as well. With a smile on her face, she did this for several hymns. I learned that day that Janet's mom had been a church organist and choir director. The songs were in her bones, they were a part of who she was. Her joy and gratitude sang forth. This was a woman who was practiced at gratitude and singing thanks to God.

There is a saying that goes, "Joy is not the absence of suffering. It is the presence of God." So, we reorient ourselves to God and to grace. Joy, prayer, thanksgiving, peace, these identify spiritual maturity for Paul. But it takes practice, and it takes reminding that God is near, and it takes prayer. God's vision for us is shalom, wholeness in every sense of the word. But it isn't just given to us, we work to help shape our lives into shalom.

Therefore, friends, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, let us clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Let us bear with one another and forgive one other; just as God has forgiven us. Above all, may we clothe ourselves with love.

In doing this, may the peace of Christ rule in our hearts. And let us be thankful and with gratitude in our hearts let us sing songs to God. And whatever we do, in word or deed, let us do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God through him.

Amen.

ⁱ Anne Lamott, “Help, Thanks. Wow: The Three Essential Prayers.” p. 43-68

ⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 46

ⁱⁱⁱ The modern description of clothing in this metaphor is taken from <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2015-12-21/colossians-312-17/>

^{iv} Maxie D. Dunnam, “The Preacher’s Commentary – Vol. 31: Galatians/Ephesians/Philippians/Colossians/Philemon

^v Lamott, p. 44-45

^{vi} Ibid., p. 47

^{vii} <https://marciglass.com/2017/06/10/programmed-to-praise/>