

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalm 100

Philippians 4:4-9

John 6:25-35

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.

Now that I’ve opened my mouth to speak, I’m sure you’ve noticed that I grew up in the South. What you might not know is that in the world I grew up in, we set great store by having good manners. There were just certain rule that you didn’t dare break for fear of ridicule or ostracism. Those potential consequences kept a lot of us in line. Needless to say, in order to know what those rules were, it was important to have some working knowledge of good etiquette. Growing up in the South meant that I was raised by a woman with an etiquette book under her arm. Her voice still haunts me from time to time: “Elizabeth, have you written your thank you notes?”

So here we are in God’s house to celebrate our national holiday known as Thanksgiving....to give official and public thanks to God for all that has been provided to us. As we approach this holiday we anticipate with joy.....and perhaps as little trepidation as well.....a day spent with family and friends. We all have visions and expectations of what this day should look like. It took me a long time to realize that practically nobody was having a Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving.

But as I pondered the meaning of this holiday for all of us collectively and for each of us individually, it occurred to me that this holiday encompasses far more than a mere thank you

note or the adherence to good etiquette. This holiday is our acknowledgment of our dependence on God and a celebration of all that God has created and all things that sustain us in this life.

This national holiday was first celebrated in 1621 with a three day festival that the native Americans and the pilgrims shared to celebrate the first successful and plentiful harvest for the pilgrims in the new world. More than a century went by before it was repeated. George Washington declared a Day of Thanksgiving in 1789, but it did not become an annual event until 1863 smack in the middle of the Civil War when President Lincoln established a national day of Thanksgiving on the last Thursday of November each year. Eighty years later, Congress made it official in 1941. Sometimes things move slowly in this country.

What strikes me about that history is that this holiday was established as an annual observance in the middle of the Civil War. What a terrible time that was for our country. A nation divided in bitter conflict over what our common identity would be and which policies would become the law of the land. It divided not only a nation, but communities and families and churches. And yet, the nation paused in the middle of this grueling conflict to give thanks to God.....to remember that God is our provider.....that God exists always and is the One to whom we owe our heartfelt thanks for all that we are and for all that we have. We are all part of his creation.

That's exactly the message that St. Paul was sending in his letter to the Philippians. Written to the church in Philippi while he was imprisoned and was awaiting execution, Paul speaks to them and to us about rejoicing in the Lord always and in all circumstances. Paul reminds us that the Lord is at hand. Jesus is among us. But what Paul asks us to do is not always easy. To give thanks to God in all circumstances is sometimes quite an effort. Paul implores us, from his prison cell, not to worry about anything. Given his circumstances, we cannot look him in the eye and say, "Easy for you to say!"

We are no strangers to anxiety. Despite our awareness of the gifts and blessings that we enjoy, we know the grip of anxiety. It might be a personal crisis.....perhaps a severe illness or the threat of imminent death; it might be the loss of a job and the threat of having no income; it might be the loss of a son or daughter to drug addiction and alienation; it might be the death of a friend or family member that changes life for us forever; it might be a natural catastrophe that destroys homes and people's lives. The list of possibilities for heartbreak in this life is endless. And yet, Paul tells us to give thanks to God in all circumstances.

But our anxiety might not be personal, but communal. It might be triggered by events happening around us over which we have no control. Our nation has just been through a

national election that revealed deep divides among us as a people.....divides about which many of us might not have been aware. Transitions in government are always accompanied by a certain amount of uncertainty as folks are not quite sure what to expect or what will happen. Knowing how deep our divisions are may simply have increased that sense of uncertainty. And yet, Paul tells us that we are not to worry about anything but by prayer in supplication and in thanksgiving we are to make our requests known to God. God does not put any restrictions or limitations on what we can ask for. God knows our hearts even before we speak. And God knows the prayers in our hearts even when we don't speak at all. Paul assures us that if we petition God, God's peace will guard our hearts and our minds. God's peace can change how we think.....and how we think can change how we feel.....and how we feel can determine what we decide to do.

This past Sunday, we celebrated Christ the King, Jesus, the one who came to live among us to reveal to us the nature and character of God. The one who suffered as we humans suffer, the one who wept as we do and the one who gave us glimpses of the kingdom of God. Paul finds his joy and his solace by keeping focused on our Lord and our savior. The one who died a humiliating death to build a bridge for us to enter the kingdom of heaven. In Jesus is our joy. In Jesus is our security. In Jesus is our peace. We may not know what lies ahead in this life, but we do know what lies ahead in the next because Jesus has told us and Jesus has shown us.

Let's not forget to whom we belong. Let's not grow weary in being disciples of Christ. Let's not lose hope when we are anxious or afraid. Following Jesus is not easy. Jesus requires from us so many things that are counter-intuitive.....things that are the exact opposite of how we feel or what we want to do. But glimpses of the kingdom of God still come to us because Jesus has already broken into this life and left a footprint that none of us can fill, but one that will not fade with time. Every time I see someone act in a way that I know is the way that Jesus has taught us all, I am revived. Every time I see someone respond with love to something hateful, I am renewed. Every time I see someone stand tall and composed in the face of criticism for the sake of Jesus Christ, I am rebuked for my unwillingness to do likewise, but I am also restored by being reminded of who I am and whose I am.

Paul tells the Philippians and Paul is telling us where to put our focus. Whatever we see that is honorable, we should focus on that. Whatever we see that is just and fair, we should focus on that. Whatever we see that is pure, we should focus on that. Whatever we see that is pleasing, we should focus on that. Whatever we see that is commendable, we should focus on that. Whatever we see that shows us excellence, we should focus on that. Whatever is worthy of praise, we should focus on that. We have a choice about where we put our attention. We have

a choice about what our priorities are. We may not have a choice about what is going on around us, but we do have a choice about where we put our focus and how we will respond.

With our focus on Christ Jesus, we will know how he wants us to respond. Let's not lose sight of the dark-skinned, middle eastern, Jewish carpenter who wandered the countryside without a home showing us how to live into the kingdom of God beginning right now. It matters what we do. It matters what we say. It matters where our hearts are. Paul implores us to keep doing the things we do in the name of Christ.....to continue to care for the poor, the sick, the wounded, the imprisoned and the downcast.....to continue to feed the hungry and clothe the naked.....to continue to do good to those who want to harm us.....to continue to respond to hate with love.....to continue to work for justice for all people.....to continue to respect the dignity of every human being.....to continue to build bridges between people.....to continue to resist the evil forces in this world that would destroy the creatures of God.....to continue to share the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.....and to continue to praise God with thanksgiving in all circumstances and Paul reminds us that the God of peace will be with us.

To give thanks to God in all circumstances is to bear witness to God's presence and action in the world despite the fact that we may have no knowledge or understanding of how God is working in the world, just the sure and certain faith that God continues to move over the earth and continues to create. Resurrections still come out of destruction. And God is still creating order out of chaos.

Thanksgiving is not just about good etiquette. It's so much more. Even though we know that saying 'thank you' is always a good idea, we may not be aware that an attitude of gratitude improves the environments in which we live and work. It does good things for us psychologically and emotionally. Best of all, it nourishes other people. It builds them up. But at the end of the day, our thanks to God in all circumstances acknowledges God's sovereignty in all things and our dependence on Him. Our thanksgiving and praise nourish and deepen our relationship with God. We always move a little closer to the one that we are thanking and they move a little closer to us. Our thanksgivings to God keep us focused on the things that really count.....the things that determine the choices we make about our time here in this life and prepare us for life everlasting.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN