

Putting Christ in Thanksgiving  
Philippians 4:4-13  
Rev. Pen Peery  
First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC  
November 22, 2015

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.

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

+++

If you haven't figured it out yet, there is a particular theme to today's worship service.

Thanksgiving.

Of all the holidays we celebrate, Thanksgiving is the one that I think gets the short-shift. I almost feel sorry for Thanksgiving. In our house, we haven't even eaten the last of our Halloween candy and now we have already ordered our Christmas tree from the First Presbyterian Schools.

We just rush right by it.  
There are wreaths on the light-posts lining our city's streets.  
Eggnog has made its way back onto the grocery store shelves.  
And SouthPark Mall has already built and torn down their Christmas glacier to (finally) make room for the tree.

I received an email about six hours after the SouthPark glacier first appeared in all of its glory. The email was from someone who I am sure was well-meaning...not

someone who is a church member, but someone who wanted me to join in a protesting the fact that our culture continues to take Christ out of Christmas. For the person who wrote me the email, the mall's decision to substitute a glacier for the tree was exhibit "a" of the "war on Christmas."

Setting aside the fact that a Christmas tree is actually not a Christian symbol....and that there are a lot of other really important issues for Christians to focus on beyond whether or not a commercial enterprise is adequately representing an orthodox theology of the incarnation...I felt right defensive when I read the email that tried to enlist my help in the protest to leave Christ in Christmas.

Before we even get to Christmas (much less Advent), we need to do a better job of putting Christ in Thanksgiving!

Because for a Christian – Thanksgiving is about much more than a day to overindulge in eating carbohydrates and watch the Panthers embarrass the Cowboys. Thanksgiving is even about more than enjoying family and friends and remembering stories about Pilgrims and Native Americans. For a Christian, Thanksgiving is about claiming gratitude as the central and most important response that we can make for the gift of the life that we have through our faith.

+ + +

Sometimes I think it is easy to hear this passage from the letter to the church in Philippi and imagine that Brother Paul was just overly sentimental and naïve.

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!*

It sounds a little like a Hallmark card to me – big on the warm and fuzzy feelings, but void of the complexities that make up the real stuff of life.

I mean – it's one thing to rejoice in the Lord when we have a reason. It's one thing to rejoice over success, or an answer to prayer, or a great experience – but what about when the lab results come back and they are not good? Or what about when the relationship cannot be reconciled? Or when the life we thought we would lead turns out to differently?

What about then? Will we say rejoice?

And Paul would say "yes, even then." And Paul can say that because he was not naïve to the realities of life. Paul writes this letter to the church in Philippi while he sits in prison. Paul had lots of reasons not to be thankful. His life was defined by struggle – by persecution – by the loneliness that surely accompanied him on his missionary journeys. That was Paul's life.

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!"

+ + +

One of my family's Thanksgiving traditions – on both sides of my family – is...in that magic window of time when everyone is around the dining room table...to go around the circle and share a few things that we are thankful for. It's very Norman Rockwell. Sometimes we even write what are thankful for on a leaf-shaped piece of construction paper and glue it to a Thankful Tree.

I've been practicing this family tradition for as long as I can remember – enough that I can admit that in some years, the thankfulness is harder to come by than in others.

Sometimes it is just hard to be thankful because the realities of our world press in on us. A worried mind tends to crowd out a thankful heart. Spending time tending to anxiety leaves less time to reflect.

Paul writes, *Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God...*

I tend to agree with someone I read this week who said she wished Paul had reversed the order of this verse and written it like this instead: "In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God and you will receive the gift of not worrying about anything."<sup>1</sup>

Except that is not how it works.

As disciples of Jesus – we aren't promised a world without threats.

We aren't protected – in this life – from heartache and worry.

We can't expect that what we believe will lead to comfort or economic security.

And we don't practice a faith that magically makes the decisions in our complex world easy.

But we are given a choice about whether we allow that threat, or that heartache and worry, or that economic insecurity, or that difficult decision to define our life and our faith – or whether we will allow our lives to be defined by another reality...that we belong to Christ.

That through Christ's suffering and selfless love, we...and not just we, but the world...has been redeemed. Those worries and threats and difficult decisions and heartaches are – in the final analysis – short-term problems that will be overwhelmed by God's long-term promises.

The theologian Paul Tillich called it our "ultimate concern." Will we choose to define our lives by the concerns of this world, or will we choose to order our lives according to God's promises that are seen most perfectly in the person of Jesus

---

<sup>1</sup> The Rev. Dr. Alyse M. McKenzie, <http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Lets-Do-This-Alyce-McKenzie-10-06-2014?offset=1&max=1>

Christ, who, Paul writes to us in his letter, guards our hearts in minds through the peace of God that surpasses all of our understanding.

I feel the need to be clear – choosing to be thankful is not to deny the reality of brokenness or pain or grief. Practicing thanksgiving is not a choice that ignores the difficult parts of life – it is a choice that affirms the awesome promises of God.

And God is not absent from the events in our world or in our lives that cause us to worry or be fearful. No...Jesus has always been present in the midst of suffering. But the good news is that Jesus is present in the midst of and beyond the places we suffer.

And I've seen it – Jesus' presence beyond the places of worry and suffering and anxiety.

I've seen it sitting with a family in a hospice room – choosing to remember the quality of a loved one's life instead of their death.

I've heard it when I visit with a family before a memorial service – in a room filled with laughter and singing.

I've witnessed it when a man gives what is almost literally his last dollar to a person who is in need.

I have felt it in a group of people who feel very differently about an important issue come together in prayer.

It is the choice to be thankful.

And that choice is anchored – not by congressional decree that the fourth Thursday of November will be a day set aside for thanks – but that choice is anchored in the Jesus Christ who strengthens us in order that we can do things that we thought were impossible.

Even by giving thanks.

+ + +

One of the most beautiful sounds in the world happens in this room between about 8:45 – 9:01[10:45 – 11:01] on Sunday mornings. Many of you probably don't even notice it. You just think it is normal. On Sunday mornings, starting about 8:45/10:45 this room begins to be filled with a buzz...a buzz of conversation. Of people reconnecting. Of friends sharing stories. Of being together. Many times when I come into this room - overflowing with the sound of your voices - and I almost hate to interrupt...because what I hear, in my opinion, is what joy sounds like.

I'm not just being sentimental because I'm getting ready to gather with my family and create a Thankful Tree.

We all know that the reality of being in Christian community means you are sometimes shoulder to shoulder with people that drive you nuts! The reality of

getting hundreds people in a room to worship means that in that room there will always be people who struggle with addiction or depression or pain. There will always be people who are hurting. There will always be people who need forgiveness or who need to forgive.

That's just reality. Life – even the life of faith – is complicated...especially when that life is shared in community with other believers.

Still, you come to this place. Before worship begins, you fill this room with the sound of joy.

When you come to this place, when you gather with these people and in these pews – you are making a choice.

You are making a choice to share in worship with a person who may have wounded you emotionally.

You are making a choice to share in worship with people who could not be more opposite than you in the world of politics and worldview.

You are making a choice to share in worship with people who interpret the scripture we read together in different ways which can lead to many different conclusions.

Why? Why do you choose to come to this place?

You don't have to.  
Your salvation doesn't depend on it.

Why come here? Why share this space? Why?

Perhaps it is because the God we know in Jesus Christ – and who knits us together is the source of our joy.

Because the God we know in Jesus Christ transcends our petty and real differences and outlasts all of our hurts and anxieties.

So we choose to come here - to this place, together...not because of what it ultimately "gets" us – but because of what choices like the ones we make to be here mean – a life that is defined not by the worldly measure of our success or our shortcomings or bad decisions...but a life that is defined by belonging to the God who created us.

Come to think of it - that sounds a lot like salvation. I don't mean salvation as it relates to the place that we will go after our bodies give out and we find final rest with God...but salvation in the sense of how our lives are being saved today.

That kind of salvation is our choice.

What will it be?

*Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say rejoice.*

+++