

3rd Sunday of Advent C 15 December 2024

Philippians 4:4-7

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

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. Let's pray: ...

"All joy be yours." "The peace of God be yours." "Don't worry." Again, we hear of St Paul's deep affection and concern for his fledgling brothers and sisters in Christ. He's interested in the mood of his friends because mood makes a big difference in how well we function, in how well we get along with one another, in our attitude toward the world and its future.

And at the core of his encouragement, Paul zeroes in on two words, "with thanksgiving." Thanksgiving is the one, inner dynamic that unlatches the gate to joy, peace, and hope.

Paul writes, "Do not worry, but make your requests known... with thanksgiving." Gratitude grants us inner peace and stability, joy and sense of purpose, because it calls us out of ourselves, leaving us caught up with God and life. Sounds ideal, hey?

The solution seems easy, but how do we get hold of a thankful attitude? I could tell you that you're all a bunch of ingrates; that you should all be more grateful for all the advantages you enjoy. Would that arouse feelings of gratitude in you? I doubt it. It's more likely that you'd throw something at me!

Realistically, it's difficult to force ourselves to be thankful. We can't conjure it up by beating ourselves up. So how do we apprehend gratitude? Saints, gratitude is a matter of perspective, which depends on what we focus on and pay attention to in life. The grateful tend to be those who focus on the positive. This is why Paul urges his friends, "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, 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" (Philippians 4:8). Ultimately, Paul is pointing to the importance of focusing on someone we admire beyond ourselves.

But if this is so obvious, why is it that we so often miss it? Why don't we see and appreciate the good things and the good souls who inhabit our lives? The problem is we get caught up in a different kind of mood that we absorb from the culture around us, whether in first century Rome or twenty first century Australia – envy. Isn't envy the killer of gratitude?

Think about it. We cease being grateful when we envy, which draws our attention in the wrong direction. Alexander Solzhenitsyn was a Russian author and Soviet dissident. In his book, *The Prison Chronicle*, he wrote, "Don't be afraid of misfortune and do not yearn after happiness. It is, after all, all the same. The bitter doesn't last forever, and the sweet never fills the cup to overflowing. It is enough if you don't freeze in the cold and if hunger and thirst don't claw at your sides. If your back isn't broken, if your feet can walk, if both arms work, if both eyes can see, and if both ears can hear, then whom should you envy? And why? Our envy of others devours us most of all."

The grace of gratitude comes when we develop healthy disciplines. And when we learn to patiently seek the gift in the bad. I think that's implied in what Paul appeals for. He doesn't say, "Make your needs known and God will meet them." He says, "Be patient. In everything that happens, in prayer with thanksgiving let your needs be known, and then the peace of God will keep your hearts and minds." We find peace and joy in learning to thank God even in our troubles for the gifts that inevitably surface right there. It's a good discipline to internalise what we say following the Preface in the Holy Communion liturgy: *It is indeed right and good, Lord God, holy Father, that we should at all times and in all places give thanks to you, through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

So often our envy and complaint are based on our assumption that life would be better without the obstacles, hurdles, troubles, deprivations and so on, that fall our way. Can we be so sure? Sometimes in the midst of life, mired in difficult challenges, struggling through painful experiences, we come too quickly to the conclusion that these are injustices without a redeeming side. But often in retrospect, we learn to thank God for them.

Corrie Ten Boom, who, living with her family through the Nazi holocaust, hid Jewish people in her home to keep them from being taken to the camps. Long afterward she loved to tell the story of how she and her sister Betsy ended up in a Nazi prison camp that was such a flea-ridden, terrible place that she couldn't stand it. One day Betsy said, "I have found something in the Bible that will help us. It says, 'In all things, give thanks'" [1Thessalonians 5:18]. Corrie said, "I can't give thanks for the fleas." Betsy said, "Give thanks that we're together. Most families have been split up." Corrie thought, "I can do that." Her sister continued, "Give thanks that somehow the guards didn't check our belongings and our Bible is with us." She gave thanks for that. But Corrie said that she would not even think of giving thanks for the fleas. Later they found out that the only reason they weren't molested and harmed by the guards was because their captors were so repulsed by the fleas that they refused to enter their cell. You just never know...

Maybe the reason thanksgiving brings inner peace and joy is because at its best it involves embracing all of our life, the good and the difficult, the bright and the dark, as somehow, the good gift of God. It means learning to rejoice in who we are, as we are, right where we are, remembering that Jesus is with us. It's Jesus who is the someone we can all admire beyond ourselves.

Gratefully embracing our place and lot in life embraces the spirit of Jesus, who struggled late one night over the agony he would face the next day. I've visited that garden, and it struck me that Jesus could so easily have escaped to the desert only hundreds of metres away. But he worked through the desire to escape to the point where he could say whole-heartedly, "Father, not my will, but yours!" This is why Paul can boldly claim that the peace of God is peace in Christ Jesus. It's the peace he shares with all who are able to see in a cross, the gift of God to us all. Ultimate gratitude doesn't come wrapped in pretty paper and easy ways, but with the acceptance of all that comes, of all life, as glorious, precious gift.

Three things help us, friends. Perspective with respect to the good in our lives. Patience to endure the troubles and trials that do come, knowing that even there, God has something for us. And finally, performance. Say it. Do it. I find it helpful that Paul never says, “Feel it.” He says, “Rejoice. Again, I will say rejoice.” “Make your needs known with thanksgiving.” Perform thanksgiving.

Say it and sing it. A story behind one hymn in particular lifts up the power of song to keep us grateful. Words gifted to us by Pastor Martin Rinkart and the little town of Eilenburg, Saxony, which suffered terribly during the Thirty Years War. The town was crammed with refugees and plague struck four times during twenty-eight years, decimating the population, including Pastor Rinkart’s family. He was the only minister who survived and he endured the burden of conducting as many as fifty funerals a day. Yet, in the midst of all this chaos and misery he revealed the source of his strength and serenity. Pastor Rinkart sat down in his study and scribed these words:

Now thank we all our God
With hearts and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done,
In whom His world rejoices;
Who from our mother's arms
Hath blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love,
And still is ours today. (LHS 437)

Rejoice; again I will say, Rejoice. Soldier on dear Saints, with thankful hearts and your heads held high; Jesus is coming, bringing with him the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, and will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.