

“Everything by Prayer and Thanksgiving”

Philippians 4: 4-23

This Sunday is Thanksgiving Sunday. And knowing that, we were all probably expecting some Thanksgiving-ny text to be read today. You know like Psalm 100 which says: “Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing. Know that the LORD is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.” Or maybe 2 Corinthians 9 which says: “The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹ As it is written, “He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness^[b] endures forever.” He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the

harvest of your righteousness.¹¹ You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us;¹² for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.¹³ Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others,¹⁴ while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you.¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Right, Thanksgiving-ny?

We certainly weren't expecting this text from Philippians. It is the end of Paul's letter. It is filled with various lists and instructions. It even includes words addressed to two women fighting in the church. Sure it mentions the word "thanksgiving" in verse 6 but it doesn't have the same effect as all the other traditional Thanksgiving text. Rather, instead, it seems to remind us that sometimes, in spite of our best efforts, in spite of our attempts to create a Martha Stewart atmosphere around our Thanksgiving gatherings, more often than not, these gatherings are filled with tension and dysfunctional people, all pretending for one day, that we get along. And that is just the beginning of the Thanksgiving frustrations. To make matters worse, we also discover that no matter what we try,

our Thanksgiving Tables never look like the cover of Southern Living. Instead, we are just lucky if everything makes it to the table at some degree of warmth or better yet, we count ourselves lucky if we can just make it through the meal without everyone killing each other. Laugh all you want but you know it is true. The times we gather around the Table are filled with tension and dysfunctional people.

We know this. We certainly don't need to come to church and be reminded of that, to be reminded that when people gather around the table, it never goes the way we pictured it. So why in the world would the preacher pick a text with lists and instructions, a text that calls out two women for fighting in the church, use this particular text to talk to everyone about Thanksgiving?

Well, as always, there is a method to my madness. I would argue that this particular text from Philippians is a Thanksgiving text because it does just that. It shatters our expectations about perfection. And in doing so, reminds us what it truly means for us as people of faith to be thankful. This crazy dysfunctional text moves us beyond a season or a day of thanksgiving to remind us that gratitude is a way of living, the way of living that we as people of faith are called to live our lives. Just listen to Paul's words once more:

"I've learned by now to be quite content whatever my circumstances. I'm just as happy with little as with much, with much as with little. I've found the

recipe for being happy whether full or hungry, hands full or hands empty.

Whatever I have, wherever I am, I can make it through anything in the One who makes me who I am.”

This text with all its lists and instructions, this text that calls out people for fighting in the church really does show us how to be thankful. It does this by reminding us that gratitude is all about perception and articulation.

This seemingly un-Thanksgiving-y text shows us that all that other stuff, the stuff that we worry about when it comes to our family Thanksgiving gatherings, all that other stuff, like whether or not the gravy boat matches the rest of the dishes or if the greens beans will be the weapon of choice in this year’s food fight, all that other stuff doesn’t matter. What matters is the love and concern behind the meal. What matters is the love and concern behind the hospitality. What matters is the love and concern behind the gift. Just like Paul discovered when he received the gift from the Philippians. Remember he was sitting in prison when he wrote this letter. His only chance of survival was hoping that someone would notice him, that someone would recognize his pain and his suffering. His only hope was that someone would remember him with love and concern. Just like we are called to do for others as people of faith.

Let me explain: This past week, a young woman came into the office, needing assistance. Nothing unusual about this except it had already been an interesting morning that day and I could tell by this woman's body language, it was about to get even more interesting.. This young woman came into my office and told me her story. She shared that she had not been able to get a job for a while. She had tried Community Action but they weren't able to help her on her rent. She had received an eviction notice. She needed around \$500 for her rent and wondered if we could help because she had until this past Wednesday to pay it.

My eyes about popped out of my head. The amount was more than we usually do assist with when it comes to helping out. I also need to say that my gut was telling me that there was more to this story than she was telling me. I had never heard of Community Action not helping someone out unless Community Action didn't have the funds or there was more to the person's story. So I shared that we could not help with that much and was there anyway, if we pledged our maximum of \$150, could she come up with the reminder. She said that possibly she could.

She then mentioned that she had a small child living with her and that she was a month and a half pregnant and she could really use some help.

So my next question was had she signed up for WIC or food stamps. The answer was no. She didn't know where to go to begin the process.

This is where I also need to tell everyone that I begrudgingly made a few phone calls, muttering all the while under my breath about what I needed to get done that day. I found out the information for how to sign up for WIC and food stamps. I also found out about medical examinations through the Woodford County Health Department for low-income residents. I also printed off information about food vouchers for the Hope Ministries Food Pantry. I handed her the information, hoping that she would make these phone calls that day.

I could tell you, that I did all this out of the goodness of my heart, but I would be lying. I did it all out of righteous anger. I kept thinking about those babies. As a mother of two, as a mother who has lost a child, as a sister to a woman who would love to have another child but it doesn't seem to be working out, I was angry. Those babies didn't do anything to deserve to be in this situation, about to be evicted from their home. They were innocent. They were caught up in a broken system and I was angry.

I remember as I handed all the information to this woman, I said, "Your number one responsibility is to those babies. You have got to take care of them. They need you to be the adult here. They are relying on you."

I also need to admit that as an afterthought, I said, “What other assistance do you need?” Do you have clothes for the child? Not really was the answer. So I told her about the Clothing Closet. Do you have food in your pantry? Not really was the answer. She had a few things but not much. So I told her about the food pantry at the Baptist church. Then much to my surprise, because I was so angry, I found myself, inviting her to our Community Thanksgiving Dinner. “Come and join us. There will be plenty of food. It will be a time for your family to just come and eat, no strings attached.”

Where did that come from? I was so angry and I was pretty sure this young woman wasn't giving me the whole story. But there I was, inviting her to come and break bread with us. I told the elders on Monday night that I think in my anger I had missed the presence of God in my midst.

Now before everyone starts thinking what a great person of faith I am, please don't. Because that was Monday. On Wednesday, the young woman came back, said she wasn't able to raise the rest of the funds and could we help her. Once again, those babies were my top concern, so I said, “Yes, we could make a one-time gift towards her rent. Just one time. Through the generosity of a person in our community, I had a pool of money that I can draw on if there is a real need.

Now once again, before anyone starts thinking what a kind person I am, please don't because that was Wednesday. On Thursday morning, another young woman came into the office, needing assistance. It seems the previous woman had told this woman to come and see us because we had free money to give away. She got us to pay her rent because she told us she had a child and was also 3 months pregnant. Did you catch that? In just two days, this woman went from being a month and half pregnant to three months, miracles of miracles.

As I said before, don't think of me as a kind faithful person, because this week, that was really tested and I'm pretty sure that I didn't pass.

Needless to say, I was thinking to myself, I knew I should have listened to my gut and said we couldn't help. We gave a gift that maybe could have been used for someone else, someone who really needed it. That money was given in good faith by someone to really help a person in need and that help was abused.

These were the thoughts circling in my mind on Thursday morning as I drove to our monthly ministerial meeting. I knew I had to give a report as the Treasurer. I knew I had to tell the group that I had messed up. I knew that my trust was broken. These were my thoughts. I was becoming more and more cynical and grumpy, going over and over again how I had got taken by a sob story.

That is until an email came through on my phone. This email was in response to the Theology Tuesday that I had sent out earlier this week. The Theology Tuesday asked “What are you thankful for in your life and how do you live out your gratitude each and everyday?” Someone replied to this by saying, “It is not what we say about our blessings. It is how we use them that is the measure of our thanksgiving. All we can do is show our gratitude to God for the many gifts that fill our lives by thanking him and by the way we treat others.

Like I said before, before everyone starts thinking I have all the answers as the preacher, please don't. I'm just grateful to be a part of a community of faith that constantly reminds me why we do what we do.

Because I needed those words in that moment. I needed to be reminded that it wasn't the money that mattered. What mattered was showing love and concern to another child of God. In that moment, I was reminded of all the gifts that fill my life, gifts that I take for granted. I don't know what it is like to not have things. Even when I complain about the amount of bills I have, I know I have a roof over my head. I have money in the bank. I have food in the pantry. I have enough. I have never had to ask for assistance to feed my children. I have never had to ask for help in meeting my needs. I have never asked for help. But I know throughout my lifetime help was granted to me before I even had to ask. There have been gifts

given to me out of love and concern. There have been gifts given to me because I was at one of the lowest points in my life. There have been gifts given to me as a way to show someone remembered me, to show me that someone cared.

This email from the church member was my wake up call. It changed my perception about thanksgivings. This email gave me the ability to recognize the many gifts that fill my life. It reminded me that we are called to articulate our gratitude, to give expression to it no matter how inadequate it may seem, to show our gratitude for the gifts given to us, especially gifts given to us before we can even ask for them.

This email was my wake up call. It reminded me that I am not called to judge. I am not called to be patronizing or condescending. I am not called to be self-righteous. What I am called to do is love. What I am called to do is show grace. What I am called to do is be present, just like Jesus was during his ministry while here on earth.

I needed these words of wisdom that day because....on Thursday night, at our community dinner, sure enough, there was a young woman, there with her boyfriend. Now, I could have gone and confronted this young woman, told her how she had broken my trust, how hurt I felt, how angry I was because she lied to me. I could have caused a scene that night at the dinner but I didn't because 1) the

story would have ended up on the front page of the Woodford Sun and who wants that kind of publicity and 2) the church doesn't have bail money in its budget.

But most importantly, I didn't because someone reminded me that I am not called to judge. I am not called to be patronizing or condescending. I am called to be present. I am called to show gratitude for the gifts given to me by thanking my God and sharing God's love and grace with others, no matter what. So when I saw this woman in the line, waiting to fill her plate, I simply gave her a hug and said, how glad I was that she was here.

A gift was given with no strings attached, not for the woman. But for me, a reminder of God's grace that was given to me, regardless of all the times I had messed up in my life. God's love and grace was extended to me, no strings attached.

It has always been about the love and concern behind the gift. The gift given to me, given to all of us, in hopes that we would know some kindness. The gift given to us because we all find ourselves in dark places, needing to know someone remembers us, someone recognizes our hurt, that someone cares about us. The gift given to all of us in hopes that we would become lights in the darkness, shining for all to see, letting everyone know that love will always overcome.

It has always been about the love and concern behind the gift, given to us with no strings attached so that we would always know we are never alone.

And maybe the gift I shared with this woman will do just that. Maybe like a seed, it will blossom and bring new beginnings for her and her family. Maybe this gift of assistance will free this woman from fear. Maybe it will release her from anxiety. I don't know...but I can hope.

However one thing I do know is that I was also given a gift that day, a reminder of what I am called to do as a person of faith. I am called to live my life, in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ, centered in unity and community. I am called to live my life, in gratitude, for the gifts that fill my life and share those gifts with others.

I needed that gift that day, just as much as that young woman did. I needed it to draw me out of myself into something bigger. I needed a reminder of the Kingdom of God in my midst. I needed a reminder from where all my blessings flow.

Thanks be to God. Amen.