

November 20, 2016



## "DISCIPLE: Give Thanks"

Fall Sanctuary Worship Sermon Series – No. 12

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

*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.*

This morning brings us to the final sermon in this long DISCIPLE series we've embarked upon this Fall. It has been a season of digging deeper into all that it means to be a disciple of Christ. Hopefully we have found both confirmation of things we have been taught and learned over the years, but also challenges—to go deeper, to reach for more, to push ourselves spiritually to live and act and believe and pray more like the One who is for us the Way, the Truth and the Life, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Now, let's see what there is to learn, as disciples, about peace, and joy, and giving thanks by looking for a moment first at the church in Philippi to whom Paul's letter is directed and then turn our thoughts to that first Thanksgiving long ago.

Paul had founded the church in Philippi, an ancient city in Macedonia that had been colonized and occupied by the Roman armies. Situated at the junction of two important trade routes, it was a cosmopolitan and diverse city. The little Christian prayer outpost started by Paul and his co-workers found itself amidst Jews, as well as followers of gods and goddesses from Rome, Thrace, Egypt. All oppressed and persecuted by the Romans. Challenging times, to put it mildly.

The verses we hear this morning come from a letter Paul writes to them. He has been thrown into prison and put into chains. Word comes to him that there is conflict in the church. Evidently the tension between two leaders of the group, two women, Euodia and Syntyche, was significant enough to be reported to Paul.

From prison, he responds: "Our citizenship is in heaven and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory...therefore, my brothers and sisters...my beloved...I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord....Rejoice in the Lord, always...Let your gentleness, your magnanimity, your generosity be known to everyone. The Lord is near."

The Lord is near. Referring perhaps to the belief of the early church that Christ's return would come in their lifetime. Or perhaps to the abiding truth that the Lord Jesus Christ is always near to those who abide in his presence and call upon him in prayer. Remember—the Lord is near. Rejoice.

Paul's words call them back to the big picture, pointing to the way of God, to righteousness and justice. No matter the present circumstance, the oppression of our people, my own imprisonment, your discord, Paul reminds them, "the Lord is near." God is--even now--making all things new. This we can only see through the eyes of faith. Rejoice.

Paul knew that, in the moment, whether it's our personal lives or in our small sphere of life or on the big stage, in the moment it's not always easy to see or know or remember what God is doing. Nor to remember that always, the Lord is near.

Surely that would also have been the case for the Pilgrims during that first winter on these shores. We know the story, or some version of it. The Pilgrims were struggling to survive. Half died of scurvy, others succumbed to the harsh elements and lack of adequate food and shelter. The native people, too, were suffering. The Wampanoag tribe had been ravaged by diseases brought by the foreign explorers and were under attack from a neighboring tribe.

What transpires between these two struggling groups is perhaps the heart of the first Thanksgiving miracle. Two of the original tribe, Samoset and Squanto, had learned English, and arranged a meeting between their chief, Massasoit, and John Carver, the first governor of the Plymouth Colony. They negotiated a treaty that not only insured the safety of both groups, but set in motion the mutually beneficial relationships that would allow them all to survive, in peace and harmony. In fact, Gov. William Bradford later called Squanto "a special instrument of God."

They agreed to bring no weapons to their meetings with one another and not to harm one another. They agreed, moreover, to look after one another's safety and well-being. And this new climate of mutual respect and concern made it safe for the natives to share their knowledge of local crops and harvesting that brought forth what we now call the first Thanksgiving feasts. Once enemies, the Pilgrims and native peoples shared together in the bounty of the land and in the bounty of goodwill that their wise and courageous leaders had put into place by daring to reach out a hand across divides of language and culture and religion to forge bonds of peace.

What a cause for rejoicing and for giving thanks! We are always emboldened and strengthened by stories of faithful courage, stories of brokenness restored, stories in which strife and enmity are overcome by good. Stories that remind us that the Lord is always near.

Let's be really clear what we're not talking about here, lest faith become something of a superficial band-aid or a fake gloss obscuring what's really going on in real life. We're not talking "happy-clappy Christianity" here. We're not talking "prosperity Gospel" or even the more common advice to simply trust God and get on with things as if the challenges aren't real. As if pain and hardship and fear and deep mistrust of "the other" aren't real. The conflict between Euodia and Syntyche threatened the very existence of that little congregation struggling to survive amidst persecution and oppression. The forces of cold, harsh winter and encroaching famine threatened the very lives of the Pilgrims and Wapanoags alike.

Paul's words—"rejoice in the Lord always," "do not worry about anything," "the peace that passes understanding," "with thanksgiving pray to God,"—these familiar words are dear to our hearts. But let's not take the real holy power out of them by divorcing them from the context into which they were first addressed. To be faithful to Paul and the church in Philippi and all our spiritual forbears, to be faithful disciples of Christ Jesus, is to remember and name what one commentator has called "sometimes-dark context from and into which these bright words are spoken...[the] gritty real-life setting of danger at the Philippians' door...strife between two of their leaders...prison chains wrapped 'round the one who wrote them..."

Hold that picture of really real life in your mind's eye, and hear Paul's words anew: "Rejoice. The Lord is near. Let your gentleness---also translated as let your generosity, your magnanimity, your consideration of others, your Christlikeness---be known to everyone."

For disciples, peace is a choice. Reconciliation is a choice. Justice is a choice. Joy is a choice. Thanksgiving is a choice.

Last Sunday, as we consecrated our 2017 financial pledges, we sang the beautiful Thanksgiving hymn, "Now Thank We All Our God." Ty will play it today as our Postlude. Again, knowing its original context gives it life-changing, faith-changing depth and power. Martin Rinckart, a distinguished German musician and pastor, wrote the text during the Thirty Years War that raged from 1618-1648. He lived in Eilenburg, a city of refugees ravaged by war and the plague. He was one of the last remaining pastors, struggling to find food for his family and to share with others.

Meant to be sung as a table grace before a meal, "Now Thank We All Our God" begins with a reference to the ancient verses from Sirach: "Now therefore bless ye the God of all, which only doeth wondrous things everywhere, which exalteth our days from the womb, and dealeth with us according to his mercy. He grant us joyfulness of heart, and that peace may be in our days...for ever (KJV)."

The third stanza propels us disciples into the future with confidence and the deep faith of Paul and the early church. May it be our song as we celebrate Thanksgiving with loved ones and then enter into the season of Advent, remembering that the Lord is near and preparing our hearts for the new birth of joy and peace. And may the peace that passes all understanding transform us into a welcoming place, a place of prayerful service reaching out to the lonely and the hungry and those who are far from home or who have no home. Transform us into true disciples, a people of praise and gratitude, a people of hospitality and generosity. A people from whom self-giving love flows outward and embraces all God's children with food and love and grace and joy, all in the great example of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who poured out his love for abundant life for us and for all God's children near and far.

All praise and thanks to God  
the Father now be given;  
the Son, and him who reigns  
with them in highest heaven,  
the one eternal God,  
whom earth and heaven adore;  
for thus it was, is now,  
and shall be evermore.

Notes:

The DISCIPLE sermon series is drawn from the work of Martin Thielen in *A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series*. Compiled by Jessica Miller Kelley. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.

Allen Hilton in *Feasting on the Word Year C, Vol. 1* David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. Westminster John Knox, Louisville, 2009.

Monica A. Coleman in *Preaching God's Transforming Justice, Year C*. Andrews, Ottoni-Wilhelm and Allen, eds. Westminster John Knox, Louisville, 2012.

Alissa Davis. *History of Hymns: "Now Thank We All Our God"*

© Rev. Patricia Farris. Permission is given for brief quotation with attribution. All other rights reserved.