

25 November 2020
Eve of National Thanksgiving

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Way of Thankfulness”
Text: Philippians 4:6-20

We have much to be thankful for.

That is not an uncontroversial statement, because of all that has happened this year, and is still happening. Some are not very thankful, and think they have every right to be that way! Others *want* to be, but are having trouble being so.

And if there's anyone who can understand that, who can relate, I think, it is the apostle Paul. Paul went through a lot in his life - much of it, we would say, not good. Physical troubles, opposition, imprisonment, suffering. I think we would understand if Paul had trouble being thankful.

And yet Paul is the apostle of thanksgiving and rejoicing! In the verses right before the ones we heard from Philippians today, he says these well-known words: *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice* (Phil 4:4). So I want to take a look at the words we heard tonight from Philippians, maybe get a little insight into what Paul is talking about, and how these words can help us be thankful - now and always.

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

Pray and ask *with thanksgiving*. I think what we often do is pray and ask, and then wait until we see the results, wait until we get what we asked for, before we give thanks! But that's not what Paul says here! He says to ask *with thanksgiving*. That is, give thanks when you ask, *before* you get what you asked for, *before* you see the results, confident that God will answer and provide exactly what is needed and best. To give thanks in such a way, *while* you are asking, is faith. Faith in our Lord and His goodness and mercy. It is to ask and commit what you ask for into His hands, knowing that you will have a reason to give thanks. Maybe not in the way you thought, maybe not in the way you expected, but in the way He decides. And then there is also *peace*, Paul says. A peace that ***guards*** you, ***your heart and mind***. Which guards your heart and mind from worry and anxiety, because it is all in God's hands. He is worrying about it, so you don't have to. **And so there is thanksgiving.**

Paul then goes on and says more familiar words . . . to think about these things: ***whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely,***

whatever is commendable; anything that is excellent or worthy or praise. What does that mean? Is it just to think about nice things? Good things? Or is Paul really talking *about Jesus?* The one who guards our hearts and minds. For isn't HE the one who *is* all these things? And isn't *whatever* He *does* all these things? So to do this is to set our minds on Jesus, and His cross. Because whatever is not those things was put on Jesus on the cross. Whatever is false, dishonorable, unclean, corrupt, sinful, and base He took upon Himself to pay the price for it and take it away from us. Think about that, Paul says, fill your mind with that, and again, the peace of God will be with you. Peace in your Saviour. Peace in the forgiveness of your sins so they can't plague you anymore. Peace in the love and mercy of God. Peace in the promise of resurrection and eternal life. **Peace that sounds forth in thanksgiving.**

Which then leads Paul to talk about being content. And that he has *learned in whatever situation he is in to be content.* Maybe you envy that; Paul's ability to do that and be that way, and want to learn that for yourself.

So how does Paul do this? Was this from some kind of personal attitude or fortitude? Some kind of personal philosophy and way of looking at life? No. It is faith. It is trust. Because if you believe that God is providing for you and satisfying your needs, as it said in the psalm we sang earlier, then whether you have much or little, whether you are low or high, whether you are full or empty, you know that your heavenly Father is at work and strengthening you. So you can be content. Not with a contentment that comes from within you, but with a contentment that comes from faith in your loving God and Saviour. **And so contentment that is a gift.**

A gift that is *learned*, as Paul says, learned *from the Word.* Which makes sense, for that is where all the gifts of God come from. The Word made flesh, the Word made flesh that hung on the cross. The Word combined with the water of baptism. The Word proclaimed in Absolution and Gospel. The Word in the bread and wine of the Supper. Receiving these, receiving the Word of God in these ways, is then the way to contentment. The contentment of faith in the working and providing of God. **Which results in thanksgiving.**

Which then leads to *lives* of thankfulness, like the Philippians were living. For well-provided by Jesus, with our eyes focused on Him, receiving His Word and gifts, confident in His mercy and love - that frees us, then, to look to others in love. To provide for them *in thanksgiving to God* who has provided all for us.

With your eyes focused on your life, and what has or hasn't happened *to* you or *for* you; with your eyes focused on what is happening in our world; with your eyes focused on Covid or race or natural disasters or whatever else - then yeah, maybe we don't have a lot to be thankful for. Maybe it is a struggle to be thankful.

So Paul is giving us a better way. A Jesus way. A way to be thankful that transcends the things of this world. A way that lasts. Because it is a thankfulness that doesn't come and go like the things of this world. It is eternal. It is risen from the dead. It is in Jesus. So that we can say today, on this Eve of our National Thanksgiving, and every day, with Moses and the people of Israel, with the psalmist, with Paul and the Philippian Christians, with the leper that Jesus healed, with Christians throughout the ages, and with those Christians already with their Lord in glory - all of us, together, one holy Christian Church, united in Christ, with one voice, wherever you are, however you are, proclaiming in faith: *Oh give thanks to the Lord for He is good; for His steadfast love endures forever!* (Psalm 118:29)

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.