

around their table, looking at the annual holiday bird. From the oldest to the youngest, they were to express their praise. When they came to the 5-year-old in the family, he began by looking at the turkey and expressing his thanks to the turkey, saying although he had not tasted it he knew it would be good. After that rather novel expression of thanksgiving, he began with a more predictable line of credits, thanking his mother for cooking the turkey and his father for buying the turkey. Then, he went beyond that. He joined together a whole hidden multitude of benefactors, linking them with cause and effect. He said, "I thank you for the checker at the grocery store who checked out the turkey. I thank you for the grocery store people who put it on the shelf. I thank you for the farmer who made it fat. I thank you for the man who brought the turkey to the store." Using his Columbo-like little mind, he traced the turkey all the way from its origin to his plate. Then at the end, he solemnly said, "Did I leave anybody out?" His 2-year-old brother, embarrassed said you forgot the turkey. I am grateful that I am not the turkey.

In every situation, there is an opportunity for thanksgiving. Sometimes we have to look harder, reflect more, think deeper but it is there. What are you passing through right now? I want to encourage you to find the opportunity for thanksgiving.

Finally, thanksgiving is something that must become a habit. Why, because we are in the Lord. Which situation? Every situation. When? Everyday and over and over again. Paul writes "Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice." Thanksgiving must become our habit.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggested that the first word of the day belongs to God. Each day, he suggests we should begin with a word of thanksgiving to God. I want to suggest to you that you make thanksgiving a habit. What if every prayer began with "God I want to thank you for...? This is Paul's instructions "with thanksgiving make your requests known to God. You would be surprised if you began your prayer with thanksgiving how the rest of the prayer would be altered. Paul writes rejoice and rejoice repeatedly.

Let us go back to our 3D glasses, again. In the movies, I need the glasses so I can see in another dimension. However, when I leave the movies I do not need the glasses. Why? Because I already can see 3D in real life. It comes natural to me to see the world in three dimensions. When it comes to thanksgiving, at first we must choose to practice it. We must remember we are in relationship with Christ. We must be under control and find a reason for thanksgiving. We must make it a habit. If we will do this daily and make our first words to God words of thanksgiving, something will happen to us. We will discover that thanksgiving begins to be a trait in our lives. It will not be long until thanksgiving becomes the natural response to life.

Paul writes these words in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, "Be joyful always, pray continually, and give thanks to God in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." Will you make thanksgiving a habit? We can learn to be people of thanksgiving.

¹Copied from sermon illustrations Sermon Central



The Trinity Pulpit

November 21, 2010

HOW CAN I LEARN TO BE THANKFUL?

"Thanksgiving Is a Choice"

Philippians 4:4-6

Dr. Jeff Roberts

Pastor and theology professor, Victor Shepard, tells the story of John Newton, Anglican clergyman, hymn-writer, counselor, and former slave-ship captain.

John met Mary Catlett when he was 14 and she 12. They loved each other ardently. Newton spent years at sea on merchant ships, warships, and slave-ships. He saw Mary now and then, yet their love for each other was undying. By the age of 39, Newton had become a beneficiary of the "amazing grace" for which he would be known ever after.

He was now finished with the sea and would spend the rest of his long life as a preacher and pastor. He had always assumed that he would predecease his wife or was unable to imagine living without her. She, however, died first. Mary was buried on a Wednesday.

Four days later, on Sunday, Newton stood up in the pulpit of his church in London. Everyone wondered what text the broken-hearted man would preach on that day. It was from the book of Habakkuk. "Though the fig tree does not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines ... the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, YET I WILL REJOICE IN THE LORD, I WILL JOY IN THE GOD OF MY SALVATION" (Habakkuk 3:17-18). I will rejoice — not in my circumstances (for the time being at least they were dreadful), but in the God of my salvation.¹

As we approach the Thanksgiving Holiday, the question we will end our series with, this fall season, is "how can we be thankful people?" We all know people who seem to be able to be grateful no matter what the circumstance. They seem to be able to rise above the problem, see the silver lining, and have hope in the face of disaster. Then there are others who are never grateful. They can be blessed with money, things, family, and work and live a great nation, however they simply cannot muster within them the spirit of thanksgiving.

Gratitude is nothing less than the key to happiness.

Dennis Prager is the author of the shrewd and perceptive "Happiness is a Serious Problem." "There is a 'secret to happiness,'" Prager writes, "and it is gratitude. All happy people are grateful, and ungrateful people cannot be happy. We tend to think that it is being unhappy that leads people to complain, however it is truer to say that it is complaining that leads to people becoming unhappy. Become grateful and you will become a much happier person."

This is a keen observation, and it helps explain why the Judeo-Christian tradition places such emphasis on thanking God. The liturgy is filled with expressions of gratitude. "It is good to give thanks to the Lord," begins the 92nd Psalm.

Why? Because God needs our gratitude? No, because we need it.

As Christians, we constantly are encouraged and exhorted by scripture to be thankful people. Paul writes “rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice.” The Apostle Paul wrote these words from prison in Rome. The church at Philippi was a church that Paul loved and had a special connection. It was in Philippi that he would be wrongly imprisoned and others would suffer persecution, as well. Yet, it was also in Philippi that they met Lydia who was converted and became a leader in the early church. It was in Philippi that there was the miracle of Paul and Silas being released from prison and the jailer was converted, as well as his whole household. Therefore, although there were problems in Philippi there were also great moments of God’s activity and rejoicing. Years had passed and Paul is reflecting on his love for his friends in Philippi, when he writes this wonderful note of thanksgiving and encouragement. Philippians is much more like a personal letter than some of Paul’s other letters. This is more of a personal note to Paul’s friends. Unlike some of Paul’s other letters this one is not necessarily organized logically, but written like we would write to people we love. Paul is writing because even in prison he is grateful. He is grateful for a gift that has been sent to him by the Philippian church. They had not forgotten Paul and he had not forgotten them. He is also writing them to receive Epaphroditus who was Paul’s companion who had become ill and was returning to them. He wanted to make sure that they received him in honor and that he was not a quitter. Paul in prison facing sure death is concerned for another. That is what thanksgiving will do in our lives. It is under these circumstances and with this history that Paul writes rejoice in the Lord and again I say rejoice. What can I do to become a thankful person?

First, rejoice in the Lord. The key to thanksgiving is being “in the Lord.” That little phrase means so much and can change our view of life. To be “in the Lord” means to be in relationship with God. To be “in the Lord” means to be in grace. To be in the Lord changes our view of the circumstances and events of our lives. Before

we talk about what it means to be in the Lord, let’s think about what it does not mean.

To “be in the Lord” means that we are not “in denial” or we are not “out of touch” or we are not “filled with fear and anxiety.” Sometimes we look at people who are always thankful and we conclude they are in denial. They have their head in the sand. If they really could comprehend how bad things are, they would be grateful. We conclude that they are out of touch with reality. To be sure, some people live in denial as a way of dealing with issues in life. There are those who ignore problems, ignore difficult people and hard conversations. That is not the picture of the grateful Christian. The grateful Christian does not shrink away from hard situations and people. Paul is in prison. Do we imagine that he does not know he is in prison? He begins this letter by reminding the Philippians of what had happened to him. He had been put in prison, however his imprisonment had not been a discouragement to others, but an encouragement to others in regards to the gospel.

Paul was not someone who lived in denial of the situation. Nor was he someone who lived in fear, as result of the situation. Paul was also someone who was clearly in touch with what was happening in his life and in the life the church and its ministry. So, the first conclusion we can make is we do not become thankful by denying the truth or the events of life. True thanksgiving arises because in life we are “in the Lord.”

Let us look at that phrase. To be in the Lord is to be in relationship with God. We are in the Lord when we are in relationship. The Bible is very clear that to be in relationship with God is to be in relationship with Jesus. God loves you and me so much that God addressed our most dire need. Now most of us do not see it as our most dire need, until we reach the end of life. That is God addressed our eternal need in Christ. When we were under condemnation by our own choosing to sin, God sent Jesus to become the payment for our sin and to take our punishment upon himself. No matter what might come to our lives, we can be thankful for God’s gift of salvation. When Paul says “rejoice in

the Lord always and again I say rejoice” he is exhorting us to remember our relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

You and I can be thankful people in all situations when we remember we are in a relationship with Christ. This phrase also means to be, as Paul would describe it “in grace” or the “state of grace.” Paul reminds us that when we enter into grace through Christ. We are no longer “in sin” we are no longer “slaves to sin.” We instead are in grace. Although we might struggle with sins in our lives, our rebellion toward God no longer reigns in our lives when we are in relationship with Jesus. The result is that we are in grace. We know longer need to fear judgment. We instead can find peace spiritually.

I’m not sure if you have been to a 3D movie, yet. However, when you arrive, you are given some very classy and cool 3D glasses. Now the movie is the same as the regular movie, the only difference is how you see it. When you put on your 3 D glasses, you begin to see another dimension that you would have missed without them. In fact, without the glasses the movie appears fuzzy and out of focus. Thanksgiving is our way of seeing life in another dimension. We were meant to be people of thanksgiving and when we practice it, we begin to see God in situations we have not seem God before. Since we are meant for thanksgiving, not remembering God in these moments makes life appear fuzzy and without focus. However, something wonderful happens when we practice thanksgiving, we begin to loose our anxious thoughts, and we move from fear to faith.

Thanksgiving is a new way of looking at life and it begins “in the Lord.” It is the result of knowing in our hearts that we are in the relationship with Jesus Christ. Our first step to thanksgiving is being “in the Lord.”

We must also practice thanksgiving in all

situations. Paul is very clear about when we are to be thankful. He writes rejoice in the Lord always. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything make your requests known to God through prayer and petition. When we read Paul’s words, we want to argue with Paul and say “but, Paul you don’t know my situation.” I think Paul’s response would be “always, in anything and everything.” The Bible reminds us that the rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous, alike. The Bible is filled with Gods’ people passing through difficult times. Jesus said to his disciples that in this world you will have trouble. Paul and James would argue that suffering is not only probable, but also useful and one of the ways the Spirit helps us to grow-up in Christ. If then, we should expect failure as well as success, victory as well as defeat, illness as well as health, and poverty as well as riches, then we must conclude that every situation creates an opportunity for thanksgiving.

As Christians, we quickly admit that not all things are good. God is always working to bring good, but not all things that happen to us are good. Even so, we can find a reason to give thanks.

There is an interesting phrase that Paul uses that seems out of place, until we realize the meaning of the word. The NIV says, “Let your gentleness be known to all.” Gentleness in the Greek means “to be under control.” Paul is telling us that in all moments we are to be under control, not driven by emotion but driven by the truth. Here is the truth ... the Lord is near. The Lord is near, so no matter what my situation good or bad, I stay under control and under control, I can choose to find a reason for thanksgiving.

Why should we give thanks? Because we are “in the Lord.” In which situations should we give thanks? The answer is always, in everything and in anything.

One Thanksgiving season a family was seated