

Grateful • Thankful • Blessed

Psalm 100 Philippians 4:4-9
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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We find ourselves on this Sunday before Thanksgiving 2018 much like we did last year in 2017, and the year before that in 2016. The hyper-partisan and bitter political atmosphere in which we have been living, especially in these past two years, continues to take its toll on the psyche and mental health of our nation, and upon most of us as individuals. And no more is that felt than in families who find its members on both sides of the political spectrum. I know that is indeed the case for many of you in this congregation. The mid-term elections earlier this month have done nothing but confirm a sense of division, sometimes to the point of open hostility. Welcome to the new normal, at least in the short term. **So, what can we do to find some peace, sanity, and respite?**

Well, I'm not sure spending the Thanksgiving holiday with relatives is the answer. But it will indeed be a reality for many of you later this week. My prayers are with you. You may want to recall a few Bible verses if you're one of those who are a bit apprehensive about spending Thanksgiving Day with your extended family and/or friends. It might help to recall our Epistle Reading for this Sunday from Philippians 4, "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, rejoice. 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 (Phil. 4: 5b-7). Here's another one that might help, Colossians 3:15, "And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. *And be thankful.*"

Gratitude and thankfulness seem to be an important key. Yet, many are finding it harder these days to feel that way. From a spirituality perspective, this may also help. Some of our spiritual ancestors described the Divine as the Light that dwells within and flows through all things. Jesus taught us that God is Love. Putting these two together leads to an understanding of **God as the Love that dwells within and flows through all things. Being grateful and thankful can help open up our hearts and minds to experience that Love that flows through us, through others, and through all of creation.** You may even want to make a mantra out of the title of this sermon and image on the cover of today's worship bulletin: Grateful • Thankful • Blessed.

Along those lines as we approach the Thanksgiving holiday, I invite you to take a good close look around you – here in this sanctuary, at home, at work, at school, on the road, everywhere you find yourself. Following the list in the Philippians 4:8, search for and recognize whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, any excellence and anything worthy of praise, and think about these things. And do more than simply think about these things. **Thank God for them. Then, allow them to lead you to respond in actions and deeds of gratitude and thanksgiving.**

Identify those persons in your life who are loving, caring, helpful, and a blessing to you – and maybe even those who are a thorn in your side – and thank God for those persons. Perhaps you can thank those persons directly. This helps us to remember that God is present and with us in the ordinary, routine events of our daily life.

Our very practice of giving thanks – the act of thanksgiving – can bring God's Sacred Presence more readily and clearly to our consciousness, recognition, and experience. When it comes to God, remember that thanking God for our blessings in life isn't really for God's benefit. Rather, it benefits us as we learn to live life in a spirit of gratitude. In the process, we often become even more aware just how much we are the recipients of God's grace. Not too surprisingly, there's not a religion or type of spirituality anywhere in the world that doesn't include thankfulness as a vital part of its path to wholeness and well-being. **As a spiritual exercise I'd like to encourage you to reflect upon your own pattern of giving thanks and showing appreciation and gratitude.**

I get a weekly email newsletter from an organization called the SALT Project, a progressive Christian blog. Earlier this week their blog was entitled, "A Brief Theology of Thanksgiving." In a section called "The Astounding Power of Gratitude," they write: "If we think of "gratitude" primarily as a kind of duty to discharge (*Now remember to write that thank-you note!*), we're missing the boat entirely, effectively reducing one of life's wonders to mere good manners. On the contrary, gratitude is a vital force in the world, a profoundly humanizing act that builds relationships, communities, and healthy human hearts."

It goes on to state what is now widely known, "The science on this is in, and it's overwhelming: in study after study, gratitude has been shown to lead to stronger relationships, better sleep, lower blood pressure, fewer trips to the doctor, fewer depressive symptoms, more patience, and more perseverance, among other benefits. In one particularly intriguing study, **gratitude turns out to be a powerful antidote to the "Headwinds/Tailwinds Asymmetry," our all-too-common tendency to focus on obstacles (headwinds) and overlook blessings (tailwinds), an imbalance that over time leads to feeling aggrieved and resentful. In short, focusing on headwinds breeds bitterness; focusing on tailwinds breeds thanksgiving.**"

Many folks suggest that as a spiritual exercise it is a good idea to keep a gratitude journal, spending a few moments at the end of the day, or any time, and jotting down things you were thankful for that day. Even sitting down to write a good old fashion thank you note is another way to help enhance our gratefulness. The article offers this challenge. **"Will we spend our time focusing on 'headwinds,' and thereby create the perfect petri dish for growing resentments and narratives of grievance? Or will we spend our time focusing on 'tailwinds,' and thereby nourish the soil for growing gratitude and narratives of appreciation?** In short, gratitude journals and thank-you notes, simple as they may be, are concrete, intentional ways to carve out time for paying attention to the tailwinds in our lives." I encourage you to use your own imagination in coming up with other ways to **pay attention to the blessings in your life.**

I know there are a lot of different understandings of the nature, use, and effectiveness of prayer even among those in this community of faith. But I'd like to commend **the power of prayer.** And for those who do not believe in an interventionist God who dispenses gifts according to our prayer wish lists, let me encourage you to at least use prayer as a way to express gratitude, thankfulness, and recognition of your being blessed, and if for nothing else, gratitude for your very life itself. When

approached this way, "prayer is a kind of spoken gratitude journal, an intimate thank-you note to God."

I'd like to close, therefore, by sharing "A Thanksgiving Blessing" written by Naomi King.

Let us join our hands and hearts in gratitude on this wondrous day, where we have the abundance of our lives before us. We remember on this day of bounty all of those who do not have enough, who are afraid, who are lonely, and who suffer. We wish for the abundance of this world to be shared, for fear to become love, for the lonely to feel welcomed, and for the suffering to know rest and joy. For the labors, the love, the care that gave us the delights of this and every day, we say "Thanks!" For the nourishment of our spirit, the challenges that strengthen us, and the friends we have on the journey, we sing "Thanks!" For all that is our lives, for these good gifts, we whisper, "Thanks!" Overflowing with gratitude, let us shout, "Thanks!" Amen.

So, let us shout "Thanks!" together on the count of three. One...Two...Three...
THANKS!!

Amen.