

# WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/NOVEMBER 22, 2009

## LIVING GRATEFULLY/PHILIPPIANS 4:4-13

Rev. Dr. Lynn Cheyney

### I. THE TEXT

Four days until Thanksgiving – Thursday’s idyllic trip over the river and through the woods, potluck-dish in hand, to grandmother’s house for a little too much food and that warm family feeling. The Apostle Paul’s words to us today are about thanksgiving – not the national holiday, but a year-round, day-in-day-out activity of the heart. The late Robert McAfee Brown, Presbyterian pastor and Professor of Religion at Stanford remarked, “The distinctive word in the Christian vocabulary is ‘grace.’ . . . That God is gracious to us, that God loves us no matter how unlovable we may be. . . . God as revealed in Jesus Christ is a gracious God. . . . And if grace is the distinctive word to describe God’s attitudes toward us, there is also a word that describes the response **we** are called to make. That word is “gratitude.”<sup>1</sup> The Apostle Paul speaks to us this morning about gratitude. Hear the word of God...

<sup>4</sup>Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup>Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup>Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup>Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, 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. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. <sup>11</sup>Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. <sup>12</sup>I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. <sup>13</sup>I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

**II. PRAYER:** Lord, silence in us any voice but your own now, for we have come to hear your word for us. Touch us, O God, with your truth. Open us to your love which never ends... through Christ Jesus. Amen.

### III. THE LANYARD

If we had the time this morning, I’d ask Namhee to play the organ quietly for a few minutes, and invite you to reflect on the things in your life for which you can say “Thanks.” After all, it’s Thanksgiving week – that time we wisely slow a bit to ponder God’s goodness. As Christmas calls us to long for and work for hope and joy and peace, Thanksgiving invites us to remember and to be grateful.

Former poet laureate Billy Collins has written a wonderful little poem titled, *The Lanyard*. His poem is an ode to the mostly-missed, taken-for-granted kindness of his mother.

*The other day I was ricocheting slowly off the blue walls of this room, moving as if underwater from typewriter to piano, from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the floor, when I found myself in the L section of the dictionary where my eyes fell upon the word lanyard.*

*No cookie nibbled by a French novelist could send one into the past more suddenly — a past where I sat at a workbench at a camp by a deep Adirondack lake learning how to braid long thin plastic strips into a lanyard, a gift for my mother.*

*I had never seen anyone use a lanyard or wear one, if that's what you did with them, but that did not keep me from crossing strand over strand again and again until I had made a boxy red and white lanyard for my mother.*

*She gave me life and milk from her breasts, and I gave her a lanyard. She nursed me in many a sick room, lifted spoons of medicine to my lips, laid cold face-cloths on my forehead, and then led me out into the airy light and taught me to walk and swim, and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard. Here are thousands of meals, she said, and here is clothing and a good education. And here is your lanyard, I replied, which I made with a little help from a counselor.*

*Here is a breathing body and a beating heart, strong legs, bones and teeth, and two clear eyes to read the world, she whispered. And here, I said, is the lanyard I made at camp.*

*And here, I wish to say to her now, is a smaller gift—not the worn truth that you can never repay your mother, but the rueful admission that when she took the two-tone lanyard from my hand, I was as sure as a boy could be that this useless, worthless thing I wove out of boredom would be enough to make us even.<sup>ii</sup>*

Collins' tender poem makes me think not only of my mother and the plaster-of-Paris handprint I made for her one year at camp. It also makes me think of God – how often I have offered God something akin to a lanyard, believing I had made things even.

#### IV. PAUL'S STORY

The Apostle Paul serves as our mentor in nurturing a spirit of gratitude that transcends our annual Thursday celebration. Spend any time at all with Paul and quickly observe that he lived with a “thanks be to God” on his lips – no matter his circumstance. I doubt it was in his life plan to waste away in a Roman prison. Impeccable resume, wealthy, well educated, a Pharisee, gifted leader – no doubt voted most likely to succeed in Hebrew school. His life plan likely included the position of Chief Rabbi. He'd been commissioned to destroy the fledgling Christian movement – a role he relished.

But one fateful day God met him on the road to Damascus... Jesus became the center of Paul's world – he stepped off the fast track, let go of one life plan and took on another. He puts it this way – “Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.” Paul gave it all up for what he calls “the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” Instead of persecuting Christians, he became one. After a time of reflection and solitude,<sup>iii</sup> Paul became a leader of the church... and it wasn't long before the persecutor became the persecuted.

Fast forward to his later years. Rather than enjoying the power and prestige of a fast tracked life plan and a relaxing retirement, Paul finds himself wasting away in a Roman prison – unjustly arrested, awaiting a trial that as far as we know he did not live to see. It is from that prison cell that Paul writes this eloquent letter to a group of people in the thick of their own distress – and it is not a “You think YOU have it tough...” letter. Rather he writes: .

*“Rejoice in the Lord always – and in case you didn't hear me the first time let me say it again – rejoice!”*  
*“The Lord is near. Do not be anxious, but in everything, by prayer and petition, **with thanksgiving**, present your requests to God.”* “Rejoice in the Lord always... no matter what.”

When you're in a first-century Roman prison what kinds of things do you reflect on as NamHee plays? My list would most likely be extremely short, far less transcendent than Paul's. At the top of his “things I'm grateful for” list is this – “The Lord is near.” A remarkable first thought for anyone, let alone a man in prison.

And then he goes on – think about things this way he says – *let your mind spend some time on*

*things that are noble and truthful and you'll find plenty to be grateful for.* Perhaps there in prison Paul recalled the nobility of a courageous martyr or the simple truth of the love of God and felt that twinge of gratitude. *Think about things that are lovely and admirable and excellent and your heart will be full,* he says. Perhaps Paul was remembering the simple beauty of a sunset or an act of kindness between friends and felt that stir of the heart you feel whenever you bump into beauty and kindness. Wrote Edna St. Vincent Millay:

O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!□  
Thy winds, thy wide grey skies!□  
Thy mists, that roll and rise!□  
Thy woods, this autumn day. . . □ . . . I do fear □  
Thou'st made the world too beautiful this year.

The discipline of noticing, remembering, naming what is good.

Paul learned to peel away what was harsh and difficult to find the not-always-so-tangible gifts that give life its ultimate quality. He could look beyond what was hard for what was good. And what was good was the presence of God, the experiences of nobility and truth, beauty and kindness and excellence that not even harsh circumstances could take away. *“Rejoice in the Lord always – and in case you didn’t hear me the first time let me say it again – rejoice!”*

Some years back a group of Methodists on a mission trip made their way to Calcutta in India. On their itinerary was a visit to Mother Theresa who spent her life in the harshest of conditions with the poorest of the poor in Calcutta’s slums. Waiting in the foyer of the convent to meet with her, the leader of the group wondered what she would be like? What would she say? Then, the door to the room opened and there she was – across her face, he recalls, was a smile that reflected a deep sense of joy. She greeted the American delegation no more or less warmly than she would greet a suffering soul off the street. Her words of greeting were words of encouragement and thanksgiving: “Isn’t it wonderful!” she said, “We have a God who is the God of hope!”

Mother Theresa too had learned to peel away what is harsh and difficult to find the not-always-so-tangible gifts that give life its ultimate quality... to look beyond what is hard for what is good... things like hope and beauty, courage and goodness... most important of all – the nearness of God, no matter what.

## **V. HARSH REALITIES**

As we step into Thanksgiving week things in our world are indeed difficult. Too much of CNN and the Times leaves us worried, skittish. Yes, we have roofs over our heads and food in the refrigerator but the bounty and peace and security we have known in other times seem to have been replaced with a pervasive anxiety. On the surface of things there might seem little to be thankful for. And yet, the Apostle’s words, from prison no less, invite us to look again... *“Rejoice in the Lord always – and in case you didn’t hear me the first time let me say it again – rejoice!”* Look below what is difficult for what is good... and say thanks.

The first Thanksgiving also took place in the midst of harsh realities. Of the 110 pilgrims who left England for the freedom of the new world, fewer than 50 survived the first winter. In 1621 the pilgrim’s first thanksgiving feast was meager – not the “everything’s-swell” celebration of abundance that we imagine... there were no cranberries or pumpkin pie. But it was a celebration – for they could look through what had been very hard for what was good. Seeing the constancy of God’s love and presence even in the face of extreme hardship... in the face of a difficult time of life, they said thanks.

And that is our call. Surely all is not perfect in our collective lives. Thanksgiving Day arrives in the midst of life that sometimes can be just plain hard. Our community of faith has had its share of illness and death, broken relationships and painful economics. But Paul's words to the church at Philippi are intended for us too... "Rejoice in the Lord always – and in case you didn't hear me the first time let me say it again – rejoice!" Look beyond what is hard for what is good... our faith calls us to pay attention, to remember, and to say thanks for the many kindnesses of God, no matter our circumstance. God's faithfulness is real.

## VI. NOW THANK WE ALL OUR GOD

In 1618 Martin Rinkart returned to his home village of Eilenberg, Germany just as the Thirty Years' War broke out... Throughout thirty years of devastation he stood by his flock through almost unimaginable suffering. On top of the war, the plague of 1637 visited Eilenberg with extraordinary severity – in one year some 8,000 deaths – Rinkart buried 4,000 of them... including his own wife. The plague was followed by a famine so extreme that people would fight in the streets for a dead cat or crow. Rinkart, with a few other pastors, did what he could to organize assistance, and gave away everything but the most basic food for his own family, so that his door was surrounded by a crowd of the hungry and suffering, who found his home their only refuge.

In the context of these unspeakable circumstances Martin Rinkart wrote his best known hymn *Nun danket alle Gott*, a reflection of his unbounded trust and readiness to give thanks.<sup>iv</sup>

Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices.

Who wondrous things hath done, in whom this world rejoices.

Who from our mothers' arms hath blessed us on our way  
with countless gifts of love, and still is ours to-day.

O, may this bounteous God through all our life be near us.

With ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us,  
and keep us in his grace, and guide us when perplexed,  
and free us from all ills in this world and the next.

The difficult does not stop the goodness of God. I encourage you in this week to find the not-always-so-tangible gifts that give life its ultimate quality... to look beyond what is hard for what is good... things like hope and beauty, courage and goodness, friendship and love... most important – the nearness of God whose goodness and grace are relentless... yes, even when life is difficult.

**PRAYER:** Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices.  
Who wondrous things hath done, in whom this world rejoices.  
**AMEN AND AMEN.**

---

<sup>i</sup> Robert McAfee Brown, "Theology as an Act of Gratitude," *The Pseudonyms of God*, p. 13

<sup>ii</sup> Billy Collins, *The Trouble with Poetry: and Other Poems*.

<sup>iii</sup> Gal. 1: 11-18

<sup>iv</sup> [http://christianmusic.suite101.com/article.cfm/now\\_thank\\_we\\_all\\_our\\_god](http://christianmusic.suite101.com/article.cfm/now_thank_we_all_our_god)