

Wednesday, November 22, 2017 – Thanksgiving Eve
“Thanksgiving Comes through Contentment in Christ”

Philippians 4: 6-20

Rev. Derek S. Klemm, Mountain View Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Question Answered

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Thanksgiving gets you thinking. What does it mean to be thankful? Sometimes I wonder to myself if I'm thankful enough.

So, you start looking through Bible stories to see what God has to say about gratitude. Early on we get the story of Cain and Abel. You know, the sons of Adam and Eve... both made offerings to God for all his blessings – but Cain's offering was rejected because his heart wasn't in it.

What might Cain look like in 2017? He gets up, and is mainly looking forward to completely gorging himself with food. He is thankful for a few days off from school, or work, but mainly because he likes to be lazy. At the table, he wants to be served first, and when it comes time to pray before the meal, his mind wanders off to the football game playing in the background and checking his fantasy score getting together with friends later at the bar. After the meal, his family gathers to have a time of sharing about things for which they are thankful. He is annoyed that he's stuck with a family that has to do such cheesy things, and wishes he didn't have to be there at all. Eventually the day ends and he mutters a quick prayer thanking God for... whatever?" Maybe you see a little bit of yourself in Cain... I know I do.

But then I think well, no, I'm not that bad. And for a moment I think I've found a secret to being thankful – “I can be thankful that I am not as bad as the guy in that story!” But that sounds strangely familiar and lo and behold there it is in Luke chapter 18 – Jesus' Parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. They went up to the temple to pray and the Pharisee led off with, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector,” pointing at the poor broken guy behind him crying out to God for mercy for his sins. You know how that one turned out. Jesus was not impressed.

Let's not give up on this line of reasoning – maybe you can be thankful in a positive way for what you have by comparing yourself to others. After all I'm thankful I have good job. I'm thankful I have a nice home. I am thankful I have plenty of food. Some people aren't so lucky,

you know. My life is not perfect, but I am thankful I have my health and things are going pretty well. I really should count my blessings especially when you think about how badly others have it.

But then it occurs to me, what about the person at the very bottom of every single list of every single thing that could be wrong with life – no job, no home, no food, no family that cares for him, failing health, you name it – could that person not be thankful since there's no one worse off than they are to whom they could compare themselves? And what if I wind up there someday?

Finally, turn to what Paul wrote in our Epistle reading in Philippians 4: "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want."

And Paul certainly had the experience to make such a statement. He wrote the letter to the Philippians, which has the famous verse: "Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice," while under house arrest. You might remember that he had made an appeal to have his case heard before Caesar in Rome, having been arrested in Jerusalem charged with stirring up the crowds and causing riots with his preaching and teaching about Jesus and knowing full well he would not get a fair trial back in Israel. So there he sat in a rented house under 24-hour guard by Roman soldiers waiting almost two years before he finally had opportunity to defend himself in a court of law.

He writes about this experience elsewhere in one of the letters to Corinth, "Five times I received . . . the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked."

And this is the man who writes, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Yes, there it is! That’s what I was looking for. The secret source of true thanksgiving is the peace of God that transcends all understanding and is ours only in Christ Jesus. Here this very evening, is that contentment no matter what your circumstances. Here is the secret to the best Thanksgiving you will ever have.

Can it really be that easy? No... quite frankly, I don’t think Paul is saying it was easy for him. He doesn’t turn a blind eye to his past and his struggles, he’s honest about the fact that it was really, really hard. But all the way, eyes fixed on Jesus He found the perspective to see something worth being thankful for.

Yes, you protest, but Paul was suffering for a noble cause. If you only knew the things I’ve done. My hardships are of my own creation. I’ve hurt people who love me, I’ve messed up opportunities, I did this to myself. Remember, Paul put out hits on Christians before he started preaching.

And then, Jesus pours Himself into our lives today. Oh it may take daily doses of the water of your baptism and weekly feedings of the bread and wine that carries His precious body and blood delivering forgiveness and eternal life we get His help to find something thankful even when everything in life points to reasons for pessimism and pain. The promise is for us.

Jesus rose again from the dead and ascended into heaven to set you free from letting the bad things define you. Your hardships are not your identity, your struggles do not define you. Jesus’ blood covering you does. God the Father does, calling you “righteous,” calling you good, even when everything about you points otherwise. And there’s more – in Jesus, there’s power to forgive one another. The anger and bitterness we carry around may sometimes rob us of the joy God intends for us but it doesn’t change the truth of what God says about us being made new. Jesus’ resurrection from the dead is the beginning of your new life, every single day.

Paul summed it up, “I can do everything through Him who gives me strength.” Forgiven and forgiving opens your heart and mind to the peace that passes all understanding. Forgiven and forgiving brings contentment no matter what your circumstances.

By the power of God's Holy Spirit coming to you again today to work faith in Jesus' life death and resurrection your heart and mind are being filled with that peace so you can hear Paul say, "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is praiseworthy – think about such things . . . And the God of peace will be with you." As that peace floods over you true thanksgiving for all the other things wells up, helping us be content.

And so I have arrived at this conclusion: True thanksgiving, yours and mine, begins and ends at the cross and empty tomb of Jesus Christ. I can see no other way to truly enjoy and appreciate the life I have been given regardless of the circumstances than in Christ Jesus my Lord and Savior. In Jesus' name, Amen.