

Sermon: Thanksgiving Sunday, October 9, 2016 Philippians 4: 4-9
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

Today's message begins not with words, but with visual Images of Thanksgiving: [harvest, cornucopia, worship, fall hike, fall bike ride, TV football and baseball, family dinner, pumpkin spice latte, first thanksgiving/ongoing reconciliation, leaves.]

So which of these images is at the heart of thanksgiving? The answer, is YES. That is, there is no wrong answer to the question. Anything that helps us to disengage from anxieties about the mundane difficulties of our lives, and express gratitude for the gifts of life and harvest and family and the beauty of autumn, will be a good way to celebrate thanksgiving. Whether that takes the shape of a turkey dinner, or jumping in the leaves, or coming to this time of worship, the holiday we call Thanksgiving is a time when our thoughts and prayers and actions say YES to the God who keeps on saying YES to our deepest personhood, the God who affirms time and again the goodness that is at the very core of life.

Rather than focusing on the more harvest-related scriptures, this Thanksgiving we sidle up to a little reading from Philippians which is absolutely brimming with gratitude. This is a scripture that says YES to the God whose love expresses a giant YES to all creation. And, significantly, in this passage the Apostle Paul consistently sets things in plural rather than singular. His words of encouragement are not to one person, but to the entire congregation of Philippi and, by extension, to every Christian congregation since then.

With this "plural" nature in mind, it's time for this sermon to be spoken by many voices rather than just one voice. If you have not already done so, take that blank bulletin insert with the two words on it, "thankful" and "hopeful" and on the top half, jot down something you are thankful for, in your life specifically or in the life of the world. (The first thing that comes to mind – give about 15 seconds.) Now, I invite you to turn to someone beside you, or in front of you or behind you, preferably someone you did not travel to Church with today, and share what you are thankful for. It can be what you wrote down, or something else, and only share as you are comfortable – if you'd rather not share, just indicate that with a gesture of prayer. We'll take three minutes for this; I will watch the clock and ring the chime when we've hit the half-way point, to make sure the second person has a chance to share.

No matter what the circumstances, there is room for gratitude. Rev. Christi Brown, a Presbyterian Minister in Spartanburg, South Carolina reminds us that "at the time he wrote this letter, Paul was in prison, awaiting trial by the Romans, with the likely outcome of death." So when he writes with such warm, loving tones about the God who gives the gift of life, these are not the cheery, empty words of someone who has never faced challenges; these words come from someone whose prospects were bleak, and who still could say, with full authenticity, that God is Good – all the time.

Because the words that Paul has chosen to use are so warm and inviting, I am going to look at them in a variety of Bible versions, with the nuance of various English words bringing us closer to the heart of what Paul has written. I'm also going to share a brief advertisement: this portion of today's message is brought to you by *Bible Hub* and *Bible Gateway*, two websites that together give access to some sixty English translations of the Bible.

The first verse I'd like to look at is verse 5, "Let your gentleness be known to everyone" (NRSV) and in particular the word "gentleness."

- Gentle/gentle attitude/gentle spirit/gentle nature (Good News, Contemporary English, JB Phillips, New American Standard, New Century, The Voice, Tree of Life)
- Considerate (New Living, God's Word)
- Moderation (KJV, Jubilee)
- Forbearing spirit (Weymouth)
- Good Sense (Jerusalem)
- Graciousness (Holman Christian Standard)
- Humility (Aramaic Bible in Plain English)
- Reasonableness (English Standard)

On this Thanksgiving Sunday, these are words that I want to hold up in front of me, in front of us, in front of the whole Christian Church. We live in a world where talk has become so nasty:

- ✓ from the sense of entitlement that says “I have the right to say what I want and because I have that right, I don’t need to concern myself over how my words will impact someone else,”
- ✓ to the actions of groups and governments that seek to silence free speech by use of violence or imprisonment,
- ✓ to vicious and anonymous comments still allowed by some websites,
- ✓ to the near-heroic status bestowed on those who can make the quickest, sharpest comments on twitter,
- ✓ to a Presidential campaign that I can’t wait to end;

we live in a world in dire need of gentleness, consideration, moderation, forbearance, good sense, graciousness, humility, and reason. The Apostle Paul tells us Christians that this isn’t someone else’s job, this is our job. As those whose life emanates from the Good News of Jesus Christ, we are the ones who need to civilize the discourse, we are the ones who need to name the nastiness and counter it with humility and grace. Of all the translations I consulted, my personal favourite was J.B. Phillips’ paraphrase which encouraged the Church to “have a reputation for gentleness.” What an important place for us to be, as people of Christ.

The second place I’d like to do compare versions is down in verse 7, one of the most beautiful phrases in all of scripture. Rendered by the New Revised Standard Version as “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,” here are some other takes on how the peace of God relates to human comprehension:

- passes/surpasses all understanding (NRSV, KJV, ESV, Jubilee, Tree of Life)
- transcends/is far beyond human understanding (JB Phillips, Good News, New Jerusalem)
- which transcends all our powers of thought/ surpasses every thought (Weymouth, Holman)
- surpasses all comprehension/exceeds anything we can understand (NASB, New Living)
- beyond any and all of our human understanding (the Voice)
- goes beyond anything we can imagine (God’s Word)

Each of these words emphasizes the gap between what we consider to be all that there is, and God’s reality that goes so far past that: words like beyond and transcend underline the difference between what we can grasp, and the Divine Mystery we call God.

I’m always a bit uneasy when I hear myself or someone else hearkening to the notion of divine mystery when something really horrible happens, as if those calamities are part of a plan that we just don’t “get.” I believe that God always longs for the best possible life for all of creation, and when something goes dreadfully wrong God is as impacted as we are. But I do believe that God is beyond any image I may have for God, that God’s active presence is beyond my ability to contain or confine, that the depth of God’s creative love, expressed through all of creation, is something I can scarcely begin to fathom, and that God’s desire to express peace is way, way beyond me.

In verse 7, Paul is gently warning Christians to not be arrogant in thinking that we have God all figured out, describing both the God who is beyond knowing and the Peace of God, which is also well beyond our comprehension. Paul, here, is saying to us that if we are truly committed to Peace – the peace that God intends – we will always be seeking more peace, and broader peace, and deeper peace, because God’s peace is so far beyond what we can picture.

Almost by definition, God’s peace, the fullness of Shalom, won’t make sense to us.

- ✓ It won’t make sense to us because we want something easier: we congratulate ourselves when cease-fires are declared and while that’s an important first step, it’s nowhere near God’s vision of peace.
- ✓ God’s peace won’t make sense to us because humans are so prone to dividing ourselves into “we” and “they,” and if we have any inkling that “they” are getting something that “we” don’t have, then our version of peace will get disrupted.
- ✓ And God’s peace won’t make sense to us because our human feelings are so easily hurt, and that hurt often wants to get even.

We say we want peace, but our version of peace is small, human-sized peace. The kind of peace that God intends is the kind that Jesus gave us a glimpse of when he said (Matthew 5:44) “love your

enemies;” the kind of peace that God intends is the kind that Jesus put into words on the cross, saying (Luke 23:34) “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

The peace of God, the peace that IS God, is beyond our usual human capacity, and in these words I think that Paul is inviting us to yearn for that peace which is beyond our reach if we attempt it on our own, but not beyond our reach if we trust in God. And with that in mind, I direct you back to your piece of paper. If you have not yet written down something you are hopeful about – something you yearn for in your life, or the life of the world, something not yet complete which you believe that God would want, too – take about half a minute now to do that. And this one, you won’t have to share with your neighbour; the only person other than you and God who will see this one, is me (if you put it in the offering) or you can just fold it up and keep it with you, if it is just between you and God. Take 30 seconds in silence to write down something that you hope for, that you want to offer up to God - or if you’ve already written something down, 30 seconds to pray for it.

In between these two things – the call in verse 5 to the Church to be a people of gentleness, and the call in verse 7 for us to embrace the gift of God’s peace, even though we don’t fully understand it – is Paul’s call to prayer, in verse 6. Rather than doing the many-translations thing again, I offer you these words from the Contemporary English Version, which beautifully captures the spirit of what Paul was intending us to hear: **“Don’t worry about anything, but pray about everything. With thankful hearts offer up your prayers and requests to God.”**

In prayer, our hearts become reunited with God’s heart; we express our thanks and our longings to God and in return, our eyes start to see what God sees, our ears start to hear what God hears, our hearts can be moved and sometimes broken by those things that wound the very heart of God, and our actions start to be shaped by God’s enormous desire for peace: peace in our homes, peace in the world. Our prayers are the bridge between who we are already – the people called to embody Christ’s gentleness and good sense – and who we hope to become – the people who are willing to trust our future to God’s vision of peace, even though we can comprehend but a fraction of what that peace would actually look like. Our prayers, and the thoughts and actions spurred by our prayers, are the place where we say a full, trusting YES to our ever-affirming, always-awesome God. May this be so. Amen.

References cited:

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