

Wesley United Methodist Church
November 20, 2016
Thanksgiving Sunday
Text: Philippians 4:4-9
John 6:25-35
Title: An Attitude of Gratitude

I have heard that in some parts of Mexico hot springs and cold springs are found side by side. Because of the convenience of this natural phenomenon the women would often bring their laundry and boil their clothes in the hot springs and then rinse them in the cold ones. The story is told that a tourist who was watching this procedure commented to his Mexican friend and guide, "I imagine that they think ole Mother Nature is pretty generous to supply such ample, clean hot and cold water here side by side for their free use." Reportedly, the guide replied, "No, Senor, there is much grumbling because she supplies no soap."ⁱ

Now, I know that this seems a little ridiculous. In such an ideal situation, why would people complain about the one thing that was missing? But the reality is that we all have a default attitude that we go to when experiencing something. Typically, we either approach things with an open heart, mind, and spirit and look for the good that we can find, or we approach cautiously, maybe even suspiciously, concerned about what we will encounter. Many of us are somewhere between these two.

In today's reading from the letter to the Philippians, we hear, "Rejoice in the Lord always: again, I will say, Rejoice." This can sound rather Pollyannaish and many of us would be quick to point out that it is not particularly realistic. There are many times in our lives when we may not feel that things are going the way we want them to, and at those times it can be tempting to think that being grateful, or rejoicing is denying reality.

But the scriptures don't say, "Rejoice when things are going well." It's easy for most of us to be happy when things are going well, but even then, sometimes we are like the women in the story about Mexico, who complain because there isn't any soap.

"When Robinson Crusoe was wrecked on his lonely island, he drew up in two columns what he called the evil and the good. He was cast on a desolate island, but he was alive – not drowned, as his ship's company was. He was apart from human society, but he was not starving. He had no clothes, but he was in a hot climate where he did not need them. He was without means of defense, but he saw no wild beasts such as he had seen on the coast of Africa. He had no one to whom he could speak, but God had sent the ship so near to the shore that he could get out of it all the things necessary for his basic wants. So, he concluded that there was not any condition in the world, so miserable but that one could find something for which to be grateful."ⁱⁱ

The scripture says, "Rejoice in the Lord always: again, I will say, Rejoice." Not rejoice because things are going well. Not, rejoice because you've been a success, or gotten what you want. But, rejoice in the Lord.

If there is one thing that I would want all of us to truly know and internalize in our lives, it is that we need to see all of life, everything that happens and every decision we make, through the lens of our faith and life in God. The scripture says, "Rejoice in the Lord always," not just rejoice.

So, what does it mean to rejoice in the Lord? I think it means that in everything we can be grateful that we are not alone, we can always turn to God for strength and guidance. We can rejoice that we are surrounded by a community of faith and love that will hold us in prayer and will walk with us wherever the journey takes us. It means that God can work in and

through anything and that ultimately God's will cannot be blocked. I do not believe that everything that happens in our life is God's will. But I do believe that in everything, in whatever circumstances of life we encounter, God is still present and that no matter what is happening we can turn to God knowing that God will be there with us. I think this is part of what it means to "Rejoice in the Lord always."

Some of you will know the story of Corrie Ten Boom. Corrie Ten Boom was a Dutch Christian who with her family helped many Jews escape the Nazi Holocaust during World War II. At one point, Corrie and her sister Betsey were imprisoned in one of the concentration camps. This passage from Philippians was an anchor for her and her sister. They were in a large dormitory with hundreds of other women squashed several to each bunk. The dormitory was infested with lice. They believed that they needed to give thanks in all circumstances but really, give thanks for lice? Very reluctantly they tried to give thanks to God even for the lice.

Eventually, they realized that the presence of the lice meant that those who were guarding the dormitory would not come anywhere near the bunks. This gave Corrie and her sister Betsey the freedom to be able to talk freely with the other women, to pray with them, to witness to their faith, and even to strategize ways to continue to resist the Nazis in whatever ways they could. I guess it is the almost absurdity of the situation that stuck with me, but I was deeply impacted by their witness of giving thanks even for the lice and the relative freedom that this gave to them.

This week many of us will gather with family or friends for the holiday that we call Thanksgiving. We will, on that day, feast and eat more than we should. Too often, we find ourselves comparing the Norman Rockwell idealistic view of the Holiday with the reality of our own situations. Many of

us will have a wonderful time with family and friends, but others will find the time to be stressful. We will tiptoe around certain topics and try not to get into arguments.

We are living in a time of great conflict within our country, in addition to whatever may be happening in our own lives. My blood pressure spikes every time I read that white evangelical Christians overwhelmingly voted for Mr. Trump for president. I know and respect people who voted for each of the candidates, but I am very concerned about the stereotypes that are being promoted and those who have been the most outspoken. For some of my friends who were very much opposed to Mr. Trump and who do not consider themselves to be Christians, this election has completely shut down any desire or willingness they had to have anything to do with Christians.

Last week Dan spoke with us about the need for us to witness to where we see God in our daily lives and to begin that right here in a congregation of people who already worship and love God. I realize that I cannot do much or anything about what others say or think about Christians and I cannot do much about how we are portrayed in the media, but I can and should do whatever I can to be a faithful witness to the love of God, and the grace and mercy that I have found through God. I can seek to be loving and faithful wherever God leads me.

I believe that a big part of that can come from us taking seriously this passage from Philippians and asking God to help us live into this. We can begin by rejoicing in the Lord always. I would suggest that this means developing an attitude of gratitude that really does make a difference in our lives and will also make a difference in the lives of others.

Paul knew what he was talking about when he encouraged the people in Philippi to rejoice in the Lord always. There is good evidence that developing an attitude of gratitude in our lives is not only faithful to following God, but as a plus it is also good for our lives. The benefits of living a life of gratitude and rejoicing include opening the door to more relationships. There is evidence that being grateful can also improve our physical and psychological health. Gratitude enhances empathy and reduces aggression. People who are grateful are less likely to retaliate or to seek revenge. There is medical proof that if we spend a few minutes before bed writing in a journal three to five things for which we are grateful, we will over time fall asleep faster and sleep longer. Recognizing all that we have to be thankful for, even during the worst times of our lives, fosters resilience.

Rejoicing in the Lord always is a good thing for us in every part of our lives.

If we go back to the message to the Philippians, we see more of how to live this out in our daily lives. “Let your gentleness be known to everyone.” We can resist the impulse to strike out or to argue about those things that push our buttons.

Let me share with you the way Eugene Peterson puts it in the translation “The Message”.

“Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, revel in God! Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you’re on their side, working with them and not against them. ...

“Don’t fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God’s wholeness, everything coming

together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.

“Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious – the best, not the worse; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies.”

May we practice what Paul describes and be open to letting God grow within us an attitude of gratitude, a desire to rejoice in God always, and to have our lives filled with the peace and the wholeness that is ours when Christ is really at the center of our lives.

ⁱ Illustrations Unlimited, Hewett, James S. Editor. P.261

ⁱⁱ Hewett, p.258