

Giving Thanks through Prayer

26th Sunday after Pentecost - Year B – 11/18/2018

Psalm Reading: 100

1st Reading: Phil. 4:4-9, 2nd: 1 Sam. 2:4-20

I have heard it said that we should be careful what we wish for, but I have never heard it said that we should be careful what we pray for. I think this may be because when we wish, it is an idle thought about something we want to possess, and when we pray it is really a conversation with our Triune God. When we pray we aren't really asking God to help us, though that may come up in the conversation. We are more often coming to God out of love and the knowledge that our all-powerful creator wants to have a relationship with us and prayer is one way we relate.

Paul, in his letter to the Philippians tells the people of that city to "Rejoice in the Lord always." And not only does he tell them once, he makes a point of repeating himself. "I will say it again: Rejoice!" (NIV, Phil. 4:4) This is one of my favorite verses in the Bible. What it really speaks to is attitude. I think I like it so much because it strikes such a note of gratefulness, a note of thanksgiving.

Some of you may know that Thanksgiving is my favorite Holiday. I think this is because it is one day of the year that we do a lot of rejoicing. At the same time it is the holiday when I don't have to rack my brain for a gift. My only responsibility is to reflect on how truly good we have it, and maybe make some green bean casserole.

Every week I write a pastoral prayer that I read after lighting the care candle. I am always careful to include in the prayer things that I think we as a church, and we as individuals should be thankful for. And if I were to reflect deeply on what we should be grateful to God for I could go on for an indefinite period. But generally, I don't go on for very long about the good things of this life. Yes, I touch on them, but it does not take me long to get to our very human needs for healing and sustenance. This is partly because all the good things seem to be in the past, and we as humans are conditioned to anticipate the problems that are facing us and then to deal with them. It is a case of "What have you done for me lately, O God?" "What are you going to do for me today and tomorrow?"

Yes, it is in our nature at times to forget all the positives and dwell on the negative in our situation. And yet, God grants us this holiday time of year for a little escape from those pressing problems. It is a time to look at the "sunny side of our lives", a time to set aside those pressing circumstances that keep afflicting us. A time to crawl out from under what might seem like a crushing weight. It is a time to give ourselves permission to be happy in the moment. After all, if God wants us to be happy, then perhaps we should try it for a few minutes. Honestly, there will be plenty of time for brooding later.

Even so...rejoicing and giving thanks is not always an easy thing to do. I know I feel obligated to worry, and this has to do with an inherent belief that if I forget to worry about a problem that I will forget about it altogether and then, horror of horrors, forget to do something about it, and then the problem will

come back twice as large somewhere down the road. And I think this way whether or not there is anything that I can actually do about it. This is one reason I tend to make a lot of lists. I feel like if I write a “to do” list it gives me permission to concentrate on one thing on the list or even concentrate on something to be thankful for in the moment.

And all this comes back around to prayer. There is a kind of prayer called a litany. In a litany we pray out a list of things, and these things can be petitions or requests from God, or they can be things to be thankful for. In a way this is like making out a “to do” list. We can pray out our list of troubles and since we have prayed to God about them, we feel like we have placed at least some of the burden of these things in the hands of a higher power. And, indeed, that is what we have done. If we make a list of things to be thankful for, then we suddenly know how truly good God has been to us, and how that goodness will overflow into the future.

Today in the pastoral prayer, we will pray a litany. And since it is the Sunday before Thanksgiving the list of thanks will be longer than our list of requests at least this once. Typically in a litany, the reader will make a petition and the congregation will respond with “Lord hear our prayer”, or “praise be to God” depending on the nature of the prayer.

But there are more ways than litanies to pray. It has been said that there are psalms for all seasons, and indeed, the psalmists wrote something for most occasions that you might think of. For giving thanks to God, I am partial to Psalm 100. In fact, there is an instruction in the original Hebrew that says of this psalm that it is specifically “for giving grateful praise.” This

is the psalm we repeated in our responsorial psalm near the beginning of the service. Finding a good psalm and praying it is a great way to give thanks because it is tried and true. It has been lifting up hearts not just for centuries, but even for millenia.

It begins, “Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.” (Ps. 100:1) This sounds a lot like Paul’s comment to the Philippians to “Rejoice in the Lord always,” doesn’t it? When I read this I wonder whether it is talking about all the people of the earth, or if it includes the plants and animals and even the inanimate objects. I can see even the stones on the roadside lifting up their voices in joy to the Lord for their very existence! Can we do any less?

Verse two of the psalm tells us to “Worship the Lord with gladness.” (v.2) And if we are giving thanks for what the Lord has done for us, it would seem to me that gladness would be a good way to come to Worship. There is no doubt that we have a generous God and it is well to remember, our Lord forgives our sins and is our savior. Verse two continues, come before him with joyful songs. Though I have been told my hymn choices are not always as upbeat as they might be, when singing thanks I like to do it with a happy heart. We might think of any number of hymns that can lift us up when we hear them. I like to think of songs like “Morning has Broken” and “To God Be the Glory”. Music and singing seems to me to go beyond the simple level of verbal understanding and reach into the heart where our feelings reside. Think about the familiar hymn that we call the doxology. Doesn’t that just lift your heart as you rise

to sing it? “Doxology actually means “a hymn of praise or literally in Latin...”speaking glory”.

Next, the psalm tells us to “Know that the Lord is God.” (v.3a) Now this is an interesting statement because it can take you to the basic foundation of human understanding! It goes right to the heart of the question of do you believe? And beyond belief...Do you know? Do you know that a) there is a God, and b) that God is the very Triune Lord you believe in. Let your faith rule you. Yes, there is a God, and God is the wondrous being that came into history and brought the Israelites out of Egypt, that came to earth as Jesus Christ to take away our sins, that comes into our lives as the Holy Spirit inspiring us on a daily basis in the here and now.

This psalm allows us to view our God from a relational perspective, who God is to us. “It is he who made us; we are his...we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.” (v.3b) This is a comforting thought and one more reason to rejoice. God is the creator. The creator loves the creation and we, my friends are part of that creation. God also looks after us the way a pastor will watch over his sheep, caring for them, protecting them.

“Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise.” (v.4a)What are his gates? Well, whenever we worship or pray we are entering the Kingdom of God. You know that the city of God, the Kingdom of God is destined to come to earth. When we pray, we are making that connection between heaven and earth. But we can also view this word construction in a more literal sense. We could think of this sanctuary as God’s court, and those back doors that separate us from the

narthex as the gates. Sometimes we, as limited humans must see the literal before we can see a Platonian reality.

Next the psalmist writes, “Give thanks to him and praise his name.” (v.4b) Yes, this is what it is all about. Thanks and praise. Yet, I sometimes wonder how much God really cares about praise and thanks. After all, hasn’t the Mighty Jehovah, Lord of Hosts, heard it all before? Well, yes and no. Really, all this praise of God is more for our understanding than it is for God’s gratification. God does not have this massive ego that needs to be soothed. Rather God has this profound love for us, and it is we who come to understand the greatness of God and the greatness of God’s love through our prayers of thanks and praise. And the psalmist goes some way to explain this in the fifth and final verse of the psalm, “For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.” (v.5)

And so it is through prayer, and psalms, and praise, and music that we thank the Lord. And what is it that we should be thanking the Lord for. Well, Thanksgiving Day is a day traditionally set aside to thank God for the abundance of the harvest, food and sustenance. In modern times we receive this agricultural abundance from all over the world and all the year round. We can get asparagus in the fall, we can get blueberries in the deep cold winter and we can get pineapple any time we wish. Though food and sustenance are important, God has also given us each other, family, friends, fellow humans with whom we go through this life. But, we as Christians know, it is not only the things of this world where our Lord comes through for us.

The great thing for which we must be thankful is that the Lord our God sent Jesus Christ to suffer and die for us on the Cross. Christ came that our sins might be forgiven. The Lord God has blessed us so richly with a divine presence, caring so much as to come into our history, to walk among us, to open our eyes, to open our hearts, and to open up to us a way through to the gates of heaven.

Please bow your heads and pray with me...

O great and giving God. We could never enumerate all it is that you have done for us. Your power and glory are beyond our reckoning. Lord all we can do is thank you for your infinite love for us. We know you are our God and we, Lord, are your people. Now bless us and keep us in the palm of your hand as we live out our lives expressing our gratitude for your love.

This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord...

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