



United Methodist Church

OF GENEVA

“Our Thanks-living Lists”

Philippians 4: 4-9
2022

November 20,

One of my retired clergy colleague friends that I worked with a while ago used to quip in times of stress, “Why pray when you can worry?!” He loved to turn Paul’s advice around to get peoples’ attention and while laughing to remember our source of help and hope as Christians.

So how are your plans for Thanksgiving coming? And Christmas, since that planning seems to creep in after Halloween, and definitely before Thanksgiving... How many lists to do have you running to accomplish the Thanksgiving event, and are you worrying enough yet? Have you started praying?!

At least we don’t have to pray about the weather here – it should be warmer over that holiday weekend, so travel should be fairly safe around here. Your shopping list may be completed by now, for all the food, or you may be praying to be able to find a last few items for the feast. How is your housecleaning list coming? And your invitation list – perhaps done by now, so now you are praying everyone can get along well that day... And the list of holiday dishes, linens, candles to find, furniture to polish and rearrange?! And the dusting to be done... And the toys to clean and bring up for children, and the fireplace to clean and reset... Leftover dishes to find, and carving knife to sharpen... Pies to bake ahead and store for warming that day. What am I forgetting?! Are we worried yet? Or praying? Or both?! And who will say the family prayer for the feast?!

How might our text for today inform our holidays and daily lives?

Paul is writing to his church start at Philippi. They were his first mostly Gentile congregation, and the first church start west of Asia, in what is today northern Greece. It was a mostly Roman town, and did not have a synagogue, just a few Jewish women who met on a riverbank for prayer, when Paul first came



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to Philippi. If you read the whole letter, you will see that Paul doesn't have any big pressing issues to address; the letter was probably written primarily to thank them for supporting Paul, and to communicate with them about his messenger Epaphroditus. The letter was probably written while he was in prison in Rome. He encourages them to continue the good work they are already doing, growing in unity and generosity. But here, in chapter 4, his closing chapter, he gives them some advice, and a few short lists to work on as they continue to grow in faithfulness. Lists make things easier to remember, for many of us.

First of all, rejoice in all things! Paul says this twice. Even when times are hard, and especially when times are hard, rejoice in the Lord, and be merciful, gentle, forbearing, because Jesus is near, and we belong to him. No matter whom we are arguing with as some church folks were, whether we are struggling in prison as Paul was, Christ is with us, and cares for us, and will always take care of us. We can and should be gentle, merciful, forbearing with ourselves and others, like Christ is. He is near and can help us with that.

Secondly, don't worry, pray! Talk to God about everything, and ask for what we need, thank God for all God gives to us. So, in that way, we reframe our problems in God's eyes, and can trust God to meet our needs, if not all our wants. We will know God's peace then in our hearts and minds, through Christ Jesus.

So, as we approach the holidays and our daily lives, start with rejoicing, and with prayer – before we begin to worry. What do we have to be grateful for? How can we be generous, merciful people as we gather around the Thanksgiving dinner, or even our everyday breakfast table? Can we begin and end our days with rejoicing and prayer? What went well today? Where did we see God's grace in action? How did we act as generous persons of mercy and forgiveness today?

Next, Paul tells us to focus on what is true, noble, just: Where do we see peace, truth, justice, and righteousness happening in our family, our community and world? Those are the things to celebrate, give thanks for, and to invest our time, talents and treasure in. Who is working out the love of God in our world, to advance God's kingdom? Rather than spend our time being angry about what is



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going wrong and finding ways to criticize and complain about the wrong, invest our minds, hearts and energy in advancing truth and justice! In the same way, invest our energy in celebrating what is pure, pleasing and commendable. And if there is anything excellent or worthy of praise, think about those things. These are the things we should be celebrating with others, in prayer, in conversation, and then by investing our time talent and treasure in growing their footprint. How can we encourage our children to grow in these attributes, and to develop their skills for good, for truth, for justice? How can we help our community to grow in these patterns, in our businesses, our community organizations, our courts? How can we support our nation to become a refuge of truth and justice, supporting politicians, agencies, non-profits that advance the cause of truth and justice? These are the virtues that we can and should develop as Christians, and as churches who are lights to our communities and nations.

Lastly, Paul says to keep on doing what we have learned and received and heard and seen in him, and the God of peace will be with us. Paul is encouraging this congregation to lean on the teachings of Christ he has shared, and the traditions they are developing to worship and live out their faith in the world. And they can follow Paul's example, to have integrity in their faith, that they actually live what they believe, as Paul modeled for them. Here is how we can grow in our faith integrity as well: to lean on the teachings of Christ in the Gospels, to examine our faith traditions, and other Scriptures, to learn and practice those traditions that have integrity and are congruent with the way Christ lived in the world. We can lean on other saint's examples, persons who lived Christ-like lives, to help us grow in faithfulness and service.

So how are we to be giving thanks, and living thanks?

Besides rejoicing at all times, and giving thanks to God in all things, we are to be living examples of gratefulness to God, of loving kindness and mercy with others, persons dedicated to advancing truth and justice in the world, persons of utmost integrity and excellence in our endeavors, who stand fast in the line of saints who follow Jesus. We can rejoice and pray in all circumstances, because in all circumstances we are held in the love and peace of Christ.



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On Thanksgiving Day, we can be the witnesses for rejoicing, for mercy, for truth around the table. We can be the ones who lift up the excellent work of family members, praising those who are generous, merciful, seeking justice, practicing kindness...

One of my favorite holiday movies is “While you Were Sleeping,” a movie depicting a lonely person’s incorporation into a family’s holiday celebrations when she saves the life of their oldest son. I just love the family’s kindness and generosity in welcoming the heroine who saved their son to their holiday meals, and their gentle and goofy conversations with each other as they watch and wait for their son to heal from his injuries, and then as they sort out misunderstandings and find true love in the midst of a wedding gone wrong...! I commend it to you for watching over these holidays.

As we think about who will be around our tables, and what we have to rejoice and pray about, perhaps we can step out in kindness and generosity to extend our family table to include neighbors and friends who might otherwise be alone. And as we look toward the Christmas holidays, we can be the ones advocating that we invest in Christmas gifts that share Christ’s love with those who need food, clothing, housing; that we find ways to share experiences that allow us to rejoice and invest in God’s creation, to broaden our compassion for all of God’s family, that extend our gentleness, mercy and rejoicing to those in our community, and all around the world.

Our Thanksgiving worries can be transformed by these four practices Paul advocates: rejoice, pray, celebrate what is good and right, and follow Jesus’ and the saints’ examples. Our Christmas lists can be transformed by these priorities as well as our daily priorities. Let’s re-frame our holiday and daily lists with these priorities and practices in mind! Then the peace of Christ and the God of peace will bless us, and others through us! May it be so, in Jesus’ name, Amen.

In Christ’s service, Amen!

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