

Sermon, October 8, 2017 – Thanksgiving Day

“What Are You Thankful For?”

Philippians 4:6–20 and 1 Timothy 2:1-4



Dear Friends in Christ!

Today we observe Thanksgiving Day, and on this day, what are you thankful for? Do you have any reason to be thankful? Well, I can confidently say that despite all the reasons why I might grumble and complain, or that there are days I'm not able to even smile, I can honestly say, "I am thankful." In fact, lots to be thankful for, and not just on this day. How about you? Do you have anything to be thankful for?

On this Thanksgiving Sunday, the apostle Paul reminds us through his letters to Philippians and 1 Timothy of what we are to be thankful for. In the letter to the Philippians he says: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.⁸ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.⁹ What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practise these things, and the God of peace will be with you." Philippians 4:6–9

And in 1 Timothy he adds: "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people,² for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.³ This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Saviour,⁴ who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:1-4)

As we observe Thanksgiving Day, we take a break from the series on Prayer that we have been doing on the last few weeks, yet the readings you heard earlier call us to pray. To pray in thanksgiving and with thanksgiving!

But as Paul shows us through his work, there is no thanksgiving if there is no contentment. And if there is not thanksgiving there is no joy.

But how can we be content with what's going on all around us, in our midst and around the world? It is difficult to be content, isn't it?

Do you remember or know who the "Iron Horse" was? He was the famous baseball player Lou Gehrig, from whose name we know something else, the Lou Gehrig's disease!

Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis that's the proper name of the disease, but to simplify it we call it either ALS, or simply Lou Gehrig's disease. It is a brutal disease that causes the brain to lose control of the body's muscles. It's one of the cruel ironies of history that a disease notorious for crippling people quickly and severely should strike someone as relentless as the "Iron Horse" Lou Gehrig. For nearly sixty years, he held

the record of 2,130 consecutive games played. It's not surprising that he was beloved by players and fans alike because of his tenacity and drive to play day in and day out.

But what is most memorable about Lou Gehrig was his farewell speech delivered to a packed crowd at Yankee Stadium when he retired prematurely due to the onslaught of ALS. He said: "Fans, for the past two weeks, you have been reading about the bad break I got. Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth."

Those words seem so foreign and unthinkable in our age when too many expect life to be delivered to them pristine and unblemished on a silver platter. Multimillionaire athletes refuse to honor their own name with contract that pays little. It's not just athletes, though. It's all of us. It's you and me. Haven't we said at one point or another "I deserve better than this."? What a contrast to the words of Lou Gehrig in which we hear a man who is content in spite of his difficult circumstance.

How about you? Are you Content today? But how can someone be so content when their world seems to be crumbling around them? It is difficult!! That's why some people like to shut themselves off from all things outside themselves to keep "sane" or so they think. Just as they won't let troubles get them down, they won't let joy bring them delight either. The problem is that they build a cold, empty life for themselves, robbing them of life's beauty and joy.

Perhaps you've taken this tactic before. You know that person who's always getting on your nerves. You vow to yourself that you won't react to their callous remarks. The problem is that in the process, you become cold, not only toward them but toward all others so that you refuse to accept a well-intended piece of advice, or love, or care. You even refuse to rejoice in the accomplishment of another because you won't let someone else have that much place in your life. I know, from time to time, I find myself in that position, the problem is that there is no joy, no peace, no thanksgiving, and no thankful prayer.

So how do find contentment then? You and I know that the true means to find contentment is Christ. Jesus Christ is our contentment even if we are in prison!

Yes! Even if we are in prison?! Let me explain. When the apostle Paul wrote the words from Philippians, he wrote them from prison. Yes he was in prison because he was preaching the Gospel. While none of us would want to be in prison today, what Paul endured makes our prisons look like the Fairmont hotels. Prison back then, were unbearable cold, cramped quarters; with a sickening stench. That condition alone would make sleeping difficult and waking hours miserable. "Because of the miserable conditions, many prisoners begged for a speedy death. Others simply committed suicide."¹

But that was the condition Paul was in when he wrote his letter, that is from that condition that he says: "I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:11–13).

"Plenty and hunger, abundance and need." That's the stark contrast between our situation and Paul's. On this Thanksgiving celebrations we will gather around the table and fill our bellies with turkey, stuffing and desserts. And before long you have enjoyed a feast with your family or friends. If you are given to social media, you will #tag

¹ (John McRay, "Stench, Pain, and Misery: Life in a Roman Prison," Christian History 47 [1995]: 14)

something like #LifelsGood, or #HappyThanksgiving. But Paul would have none of that. But if he'd had social media, he would have posted a picture of himself in the squalor of a Roman prison with the caption #Content.

But what was the secret to Paul's contentment? The secret, although no secret at all, is Christ. The reality is that as long as your attention is focused on yourself, you will not find true contentment. This is what Luther called navel-gazing, as you're turned in on yourself. Staring at your navel will not lead to contentment. And eyes fixed on others will not bring you contentment either. Eyes fixed on the feast spread before you and your family this day will not bring contentment either, sad isn't it, yet that's what we do. But fixing your eyes on Christ will bring contentment even in the darkest times.

Some of you are not going home to the feast you desire today to be at. Some of you won't be blessed by the fellowship of family that you've enjoyed in the past. Perhaps death has parted you from loved ones, or family strife has robbed you of sharing today's holiday meal, at simple glance there is not contentment. Yet contentment remains yours in Christ, that's what Christ does!

No, this holiday might not be easy, or any other day for that matter, your cross might be unbearable, whatever that cross looks like. Just as Paul didn't have it easy in prison, his cross was unbearable. But here is the good news you don't bear your cross alone. Christ is with you to shoulder your burden. Christ strengthens you just as he strengthened Paul. "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" Paul said. That is contentment. Christ was the secret to Paul's contentment and yours as well.

But there is more, for contentment produces thanksgiving and joy! Keep that in mind!

There is an old European story about a traveler who came upon a barn where the devil had stored seeds which he planned to sow in the hearts of people. The traveler found bags of seeds variously marked, "hatred," "fear," "doubt," "despair," "unforgiveness," "pride," "greed" and so on. The devil appeared and struck up a conversation with the traveler. Satan gleefully told the traveler how easily the seeds he sowed sprouted in the hearts of men, women, and children. "Are there any hearts in which these seeds will not sprout?" the traveler asked. A melancholy look appeared on the devil's face. "These seeds will not sprout in the heart of a thankful and joyful person," he confessed. (Holy Humor, Samra, p. 181)

On this day, when we realize that Christ is our Contentment and through him we are blessed greatly, we do have reason to be thankful and joyful people. In 1 Timothy Paul explains what giving thanks, and being joy full entails. He says: "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ² for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. ³ This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Saviour, ⁴ who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:1-4)

From content hearts, on this Thanksgiving Day and always we are to give thanks for everyone. Supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings are to be made for everyone. Everyone includes that cranky supervisor, that infuriating co-worker, that noisy neighbor, that rude someone.... We can pray with thanksgiving for our children, our siblings, our parents, our spouse, our friends, and so on...

The text also says that prayers of thanksgiving are to be offered up "...for kings and all who are in high positions..." This is not optional. Paul teaches us to do so as he did. Remember that when Paul wrote his letter, he was in prison and later killed by the worst emperor of all Nero, yet Paul still gave thanks for them. So today we are to do the same, not trashing them but giving thanks for them. Yes, that's not easy, especially with today's governments all over. Here in Canada, I'm sure we don't agree with all the policies of our government – like same-sex relationships, abortion on demand, medically-assisted death, the intentional exclusion of "God" from public discourse and policy; and much more...

But, yes there is so much to be thankful for, education for example, programs to help the poor and marginalized, refugee sponsorship without that, our ancestor and even us, wouldn't be here today. And more that offer as a relative peace, freedom to worship and so on. "This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Saviour, ⁴ who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:3-4) Paul says.

And above all, we give thanks for our Saviour! Because you and I have been saved, are kept in that salvation, and desiring for more to be saved.

Jesus Christ is the reason for our contentment and as a result of our thankfulness. He is the truth, the way and the life. Jesus is the one who gave his life on the cross of Calvary to rescue us from our sin, and the condemnation of that sin.

On this Thanksgiving Day we are thankful that God our Saviour has brought us to the realization of our lost sinful condition, that we would be damned to hell if left to our own ways. But thanks be to God for saving us and bringing us to the light of the truth of God and his love, his grace and his mercy for each one of us,.

So, do you have reasons to be thankful today? We do, and lots, but above all, we are thankful because Christ is our salvation, our contentment, and our joy.

Today on this Thanksgiving Day, may "... the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7). Amen.