

Ten Thousand Ways
Philippians 1:3-6; 4:4-8
Sermon by Mag Richer Smith
January 27, 2019

³I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (NRSV)

Orpha was an **older woman** in our congregation. Her occupation in life had been **“cleaning lady,”** and Orpha’s life vocation was **“servant of God.”** She would **collect the towels** in the church kitchen and the **blankets** in the nursery and bring them back each week all **refreshed.** She **quilted** for the MCC sale and let little boxes of peppernuts on our desk marked, **“Merry Christmas!~from an elf.”**

When Orpha was dying, Bob and I were privileged to be there for **her last breath.** I **held her hand** and leaned down because she was trying to speak and these were Orpha’s last words:

“I AM JUST SO GRATEFUL!”

Ever since that day, I’ve thought:

I



And so today on the occasion of this final sermon,

“I am just so grateful!”

Gratitude... Feeling it, Expressing it, Living it... I WANT THAT!

And so I'm **learning a prayer** that my friends (an older couple who have modeled doing justice and loving kindness) ..a prayer that they have said daily at their table together:

Arouse our wonder
Stimulate our imagination
Make us taut in Spirit
And eager in expression
Teach us 10,000 ways of saying THANK YOU
With a flash in the eye
And a warmth in the voice
And a wave of the hand!

I WANT to live more gratefully, but in the **flurry** of the day, the push to **DO** more, the need to **BE** better, it's easy to **let our discontent** lead the way. And those of us who **live with plenty** sometimes find it harder to be TRULY grateful than those who **know their need**.

The poet Rumi says,

"Those who work at a bakery don't know the taste of bread like the hungry beggars do."

How does one nurture **a grateful heart** when we are OVER-STUFFED and not reaching our **goals** or living our **ideals**?
How DO we find **10,000 ways** of saying **THANK YOU**?

I remember when I had young children, and Michael King wrote:

"My family is not generally like I dream it. I love my children and my spouse very much. I do. But we fight and yell and are cranky when we don't get enough sleep and have too much to do. (which is often)...leaving me carrying around in my head this unfulfilled image:

Some children perfectly combed and clean are playing quietly at a coffee table whose surface dances in the

flickering light of a cozy fire. My spouse and I look at each other over their heads and smile, sigh with love for each other and them and God and the world. We sit there sipping hot chocolate for an evening that goes on forever, because work has been abolished, or the next morning is perpetually Saturday or Aunt Nellie just died and left us 3 million dollars and we don't need to work!"

UNFULFILLED IMAGES GET US IN TROUBLE...

when the hopeful expectation and reality don't come together, not at home and often not in the congregation.

"Sometime the image we carry of a stalwart band of Anabaptists dying because of their radical commitment with their faces shining as they entrust their souls to God (rather than violate their principles) just is not what we see when we look around at our struggling brothers and sisters, our polarized denomination, and the general condition of the Church" (~paraphrased from Michael King)

But Bonhoeffer in LIFE TOGETHER says:

"IF we do not give thanks daily for the Christian fellowship in which we have been placed (If...on the contrary.. we keep complaining about what isn't, about all that is paltry and so far from what we expected or hope for...then we hinder God from letting our fellowship grow to the measure and riches which are there for all of us in Jesus Christ."

SO **are there** 10,000 ways of saying **thank you** in our **cluttered lives**, in our **aching world** and in our **life together**? No doubt we can see what **is bothersome**.

There's much to make us **frustrated** and **cynical**... and the **half empty cup** of what **ISN'T** is ever before us!

MY friend Ross died a few years ago in his early 30's.
 When Ross was 8 years old, this **bright and talented boy** had his 1st surgery to remove an arterial venous malformation growing around his brain stem...
 a **growth that kept reappearing** and caused **deterioration** of his **health and mobility**...

Ross from **brain spasms**, and eventually became **paralyzed** and dependent on **others to dress him, get him to the bathroom, turn him over and keep him from getting bed sores and finally feed him. (talk about an empty cup...Ross's cup had been drunk to the dregs)**
But Ross refused to see life that way... In his wheelchair he served as an **elder** in his congregation and was full of **imagination!**

When Ross **turned 30 years old, he** planned a great party and invited all the guests to bring **personal care items** for the Crisis Center in his home town...
 And that evening **226 lbs.** of care products were donated.
 And that gathered group celebrated Ross's 30 years in the way he had requested...
 in a **glorious hymn sing and festive potluck!**

Ross (who literally knew the depths of despair) wrote this:
 "I am thankful for each simple pleasure of life,
 (though each one is fallible and temporary)...
 And so I go to **a deeper place,**
 To the **Source of all good things.**
And give thanks for all the **ways I experience GOD's Spirit:** Living in my **friends and family,**
 Alive in the vast blue **sky.**
 And flowing from **Jesus**

(who **at the cross** made the **very WORST** redemptive!)
and made **even death~** a **biological incidental.**"

In our text this morning, Paul is addressing the **Church at Phillipi**, (a church who knows **suffering, conflict and oppression**...a church where **two women are squabbling** and the **conflict is raw**...)

And Paul is inviting the Congregation to **REJOICE!**
and then PAUL feels compelled to **emphasize** that
by saying it **AGAIN: Rejoice!**

-not necessarily in your **circumstances**,

-or in your **health and well being**,

not in any **kind of perfection** you have achieved,

-And certainly not because of all the **things** you have been
able to acquire,

BUT...

Rejoice in the LORD!

Rejoice in the Lord ALWAYS!

And again I say, REJOICE!

So it **matters WHO** our LORD is!

I am **Facebook friends** with a young man named **DANNY**.

I was DANNY's pastor in his elementary and high school years,
and Bob and I baptized him.

He recently posted this:

Ea. and every day I'm reaffirmed in my Atheism.

***And hope that those who haven't seen the light may do so soon,
with their hearts FREE of Fear and REPURCUSSIONS.***

All religions which DIVIDE are DESTRUCTIVE.

***We are all on this planet together and must respect everyone's
right to live peaceably. Religion divides and controls.***

In another entry DANNY offers this quote from PIPER CHAPMAN:
*How can we get behind some supreme being who weighs in on the
 Tony Awards while a million people get whacked with machetes.
 I don't believe a billion Indians are going to hell.
 I don't think we get cancer to learn life's lessons.
 And I don't believe people die young
 because God needs another angel.
 I think this is just stinking lies,
 and I think on some level we all know it.
 Look I understand that religion makes it easier to deal with all the
 random awful things that happen to us.
 AND I wish that I could get on that ride.
 I'm sure I would be happier. But I can't."*

Well, what I want to tell DANNY is that I **can't get on that ride either!**
 The god who creates **fear**,
brings on cancer,
snatches children,
 and **sends people to hell...**
 The God who brings **suffering and discomfort** so we can grow...
 Who could ever **REJOICE** in THIS kind of a LORD?

I would be an **atheist, too**, IF this was the god I knew.

But Paul KNOWS and SPEAKS of a different deity -
 of One who in Jesus comes down, down, down
 emptying himself to be one of us, and then boldly confronts the
 powers of evil in a way that leads to execution,
 and offers an alternative way of LOVE,
 a contrary gospel to our driven, pressured lives that demand more.

Paul knows the Jesus who **stops for beggars, heals the blind,**
holds the children, washes feet and **forgives slayers.**

This is the LORD who **stopped Paul** on the Road to tell him it's time for
 your **weapons to come down**

time to let my **grace unclench your gripping hatred**
 time to be **freed** from your **self-righteousness** and **self-loathing...**
 (which maybe are the same thing).
 The **Lord** (in whom *Paul rejoices*) offers the **whole earth FREEDOM**
 breathes **PEACE** , and finally
makes even death a biological incidental.

In order to live a life of GRATITUDE,
 it MATTERS **who the GOD** is that we know...
 who the Jesus is that we **follow** ...
 and what deity we **love and finally surrender to.**

PAUL writes of the liberating love of JESUS that **UNBINDS & reconciles**, even though Paul himself is **literally BOUND** in prison as he writes this letter.

I have visited **the Mammertine Prison** in Rome.
If this was not the cell from which Paul wrote many of his letters, it is **like the ancient prisons** that held him...
a musty hole in the **cold ground** with **chains and stocks**,
where scraps of food were **dropped like garbage**, while
prisoners and rats scrambled in competition for the helpings.

Paul is suffering and writing this letter from a **most confining, miserable** location...calling the church to....

Rejoice.

Sing ALLELUIA to the Lord!

Rejoice always...

**LET YOUR GENTLENESS (WHICH IS FORBEARANCE) BE
 MADE KNOWN TO EVERYONE !” Don’t worry but
 pray...”with THANKSGIVING!**

Is Paul just being **flippant and cheery** where there's so much suffering?

Samuel Wells, the rector at ST. Martin in the Fields Anglican Church says that:

“THE MOST POWERFUL PERSON IN THE WORLD IS THE ONE, WHO IN THE FACE OF HORROR AND SCARCITY, CAN SEE beyond IT TO GLORY AND ABUNDANCE. Nothing CAN DESTROY SUCH A PERSON.”

And then he tells this story...

In 1618, a man named Martin Rinkart became a **pastor in a small German town of EILENBERG**, just as a WAR that would last 30 years was beginning...a war whose **slaughter wiped out 1/3** of Germany's population.

Eilenberg was **a walled city to which refugees fled** in masses. And with the **overcrowding and sanitation problems** a **terrible plague** broke out.

Pastor Rinkart's 2 colleagues died and in the year 1636, he ended up conducting up to 4000 funerals. Sometimes as many as **50 people** died in a **day**.

And **the worst came** when he also **lost his wife**, at which time he sat down and **wrote a prayer** for his children to say at night...a prayer to the **GOD**, **who in all the wreckage and pain... created us, suffers with us and alone can raise us to new life.**

That prayer of **UNCOMMON GRATITUDE** was this:

*Now thank we all our God,
With heart and hands and voices
Who wondrous things has done,*

*In whom the world rejoices...
Who from our mothers' arms,
has blessed us on our way
with countless gifts of love
and still is ours today.*

Living with the **constraints of stocks and chains in a rat-hole prison**, Paul **invites us** ALL to a **LIFE OF GRATITUDE**... NOT because life is smooth, but because in the **midst of a world gone awry**, where the wrong is so strong, there is a RULER yet..

And that Ruler is the GOD who is the **Source of LOVE, MERCY, FIDELITY, AND LIFE.**
and the GOD of a **PEACE...**
THAT SURPASSES UNDERSTANDING!

When Bob and I **anticipated a move to Goshen**, Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship was NOT on our radar. And interim pastoral work was not what we planned to pursue.

But your **leadership** asked us to **consider this possibility** and what a **surprise!** OUR 8 month commitment inched on to become 13 months, and now we come to **THIS final day** as pastors here filled with **gratitude**...
for all the ways we have experienced the **embodiment of God's love within you** and
FOR your deep **commitment to Jesus and his peace.**

We give thanks for a whole host of **new stories...your stories**, that have witnessed to both your **hunger and faithfulness**...

We rejoice in the ways you place yourselves in the **Spirit's wind**...knowing that the **real work** of the kingdom is **out there** and that this congregation isn't the **destination**, but the **springboard**.

We meet here for play rehearsal and what we **do well together** is what we have to **offer the world**.

So when we **move alongside one another's needs** with **friendship, food, care, visits, prayers, encouragement**, offering **forgiveness**, we *equip* one another to be of **service in the broader community**.

There is great desire here to be a **place of welcoming** hospitality, and we will only be as good at welcoming more diversity as we are in attending to the needs among us right now.

We have been grateful recipients of your **many acts of kindness**. From those who **moved us** into our house and **filled our cupboards** with food to that **giant dumpster doughnut** delivered to our office one morning!

We give thanks for the ways you **attend to the needs** of those on the **margins**.

And we are repeatedly blessed by the **way you worship... speak the truth in love**

and offer a **long rope of grace** to one another across **hurts and differences**.

I have loved sitting in **prayerful silence with women** who listen to the Spirit's whisper. And Bob loves **visiting** over coffee, grateful for **3 selections** of brew.

The **children** fill us with **hope** and **bring energy** to this fellowship.

And the **singing**...well it connects us with **heaven**.

WE rejoice in how we have **seen the face of JESUS** in plain view at BERKEY!

Many ask if Bob and I will return to Berkey and make our church home here? We have **learned to love you**, so we won't be surprised if after several months, we decide to return and become members here.

But we **honestly don't know** where we will be led.

We DO know that we WILL

***thank God every time we remember you
with prayer and joy, confident that the one
who began a good work in this congregation
will bring it to completion.***

***And finally, beloved,
Whatever is true and honorable
just and pure,
pleasing and commendable
if there be any excellence
anything worthy of praise
...think on these things!***

Thanks be to God!