

November 24, 2002
Christ the King/Thanksgiving Sunday
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A Deeper Thanksgiving

Philippians 4:10-14 ...for I have learned to be content with whatever I have.

Paul was in prison in Rome because of his work on behalf of the Gospel. The church at Philippi sent him a gift to cheer him up, to let him know he was not forgotten. So, Paul wrote a "thank you" letter, which found its way into our scriptures as the Letter to the Philippians.

The passage we heard this morning comes toward the close of the letter. Paul expresses his gratitude for the gift. But he uses this occasion of the gift to talk about the deeper source of his thankfulness and contentment. Paul doesn't want his friends at Philippi to worry about him. Most of all, he wants to tell them about the faith that sustains him. Listen to his words once again:

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me...Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty.

In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of being in need. I can do all things through God who strengthens me.

Paul begins by saying thanks for the physical gift. Then he moves on to a deeper thanksgiving. It arises from the profound contentment he has found. His contentment comes from his life being rooted in God. It is a contentment beyond the upset that comes when the circumstances of our lives change, this moment good, the next bad. Thanksgiving and contentment go together. A thankful spirit nurtures a contented spirit. A contented spirit gives birth to a life that is thankful at its core.

I think there exists today a pervasive spirit of discontent. We are immersed in a culture that worships material prosperity. We measure the worth of our lives by how much we accumulate--wealth, recognition, achievements, rewards, and the like. This kind of acquisitive spirit drives out contentment and creates anxiety. If we pin our happiness on wanting more or wanting things to be different, we can never accept life as it is.

Years ago, a friend and I were at a retreat for ministers at a beautiful state park in Kentucky. We took a walk together to clear our heads from the sessions in which we had sat all morning. Soon we were standing on a bluff overlooking a sparkling blue lake, surrounded by trees ablaze with autumn colors. The beauty and grace of that sunlit autumn afternoon washed over us, reducing us to sublime silence. It was the kind of deep contentment and thanksgiving I think Paul was talking

about. The simple, unshakable sense of being at peace with life, with the world, with oneself.

Then, looking down at the lake, my friend broke the silence. "If we only had a boat!" We looked at each other and burst out laughing. Simultaneously we realized the absurdity of his comment. Was it not enough to be bathed in that glorious autumn afternoon, embraced by all the gracious beauty the world has to offer? In a humorous way, we had touched on a major spiritual illness of our time--the spirit of discontent that keeps us from thankful living.

Some years after that, I was having lunch with Rabbi Morris Shapiro, a colleague and friend in Virginia. I fell into complaining about this or that as we talked about our work. When I finished my "discourse of discontent," the rabbi said in a gently chastening way: "My friend, you must learn to accept the world as it is, not as you want it to be."

There is a great deal wrong with the world. As Christians we are called by Christ to be involved in making the world better, more peace, more healthful. But too often we become obsessed with everything that is wrong, finding fault with everything and everyone, including ourselves. We want the world to be as we want it, not as it is.

We must remember something at the core of our faith. God's presence in Christ is God's profound acceptance of the world as it is, God's good creation. What does that most famous verse from John's gospel say? "For God so LOVED the world that he gave his only Son." God so LOVED the world, a world that is a mixture of good and evil, beauty and ugliness; a world full of people like ourselves, who are generous and greedy, self-giving and self-centered, capable of great kindness and of great cruelty. But it all begins with love, with God's unconditional acceptance of the world and of us. To have this love, the very love of God, in ourselves is to know contentedness and to be thankful.

But what about times when life becomes full of pain and difficulty? How can we be thankful then? How can we say we are content in the midst of suffering? Here we approach the deepest mystery, and truth, of our faith, that even in the throes of distress and perplexity, of loss and deprivation, we can find a voice of thanksgiving to God singing boldly in our souls.

Remember that Paul was in prison when he wrote his "thank you" letter to the Philippian church. He was facing his own death at the hands of Rome. And yet, he could say that he was content. He could express his confidence that he could face anything because of God who strengthened him. Paul had entrusted his life completely to God, not to the circumstances in which he found himself at any given moment--good fortune or misfortune, acceptance or rejection, comfort or suffering. Such faith arises in us when we move deeper and deeper into our communion with God. Such faith doesn't come quickly or easily, but it does come by God's grace and our own seeking of a more contented, more peaceful spirit.

In a few moments we will sing one of the most beloved hymns of the church. It is a hymn of thanksgiving. The words were written by a German pastor by the name of Martin Rinckhart. He lived in the seventeenth century, during a time of dismal suffering caused by war and disease. During the Thirty Years' War, 1618-1648, Rinckhart was the lone pastor remaining in the town of Eilenburg. He conducted funeral services for forty to fifty people each day who died from war and disease.

It was during this worst of times that pastor Rinckhart penned the words of this hymn as a table grace for his family. The simplicity and heart-felt thankfulness stand in awesome contrast to the circumstances in Rinckhart's life and the lives of the German people.

Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices,
who wondrous things hath done, in whom God's world rejoices,
who from our mothers' arms, hath blessed us on our way
with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

"I have learned to be content with whatever I have," wrote Paul. May this Thanksgiving season bring to each of us a deeper contentment and a deeper thanksgiving. May the mystery of our faith--the great love of God for us and the world--enable us to sense each gift, each blessing of life. And as our spirits grow in this kind of contentment and thanksgiving, may we then live as grateful people, serving God and God's beloved creation in the spirit of Jesus Christ, with everything we have and are.