

November 18, 2018  
Philippians 4: 10-13  
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**“Gifts, Graces, and Gratitude”**

**Good morning! As an early Thanksgiving approaches this week, I'm sure many of you are doing travel planning or menu planning or both -- maybe trying to figure out how your food is going to make the trip to its destination on the Thanksgiving table. This is a week where you'll probably be hearing a lot about gratitude and thankfulness -- and appropriately so. I think it's wonderful that we have a holiday which reminds us to be grateful for the blessings we have received. And although Thanksgiving is celebrated by folks of many faith traditions, and folks with no faith tradition at all, I believe that the blessings we receive come from God, and that our greatest blessing is Jesus Christ. Not surprisingly, there's a lot of support for this idea in the Bible, so as we finish our series of on Philippians chapter 4 titled Gifts, Graces and Gratitude , I want to focus on gratitude today.**

**Philippians 4:11-12 is a passage which you've probably heard before: Paul is writing from prison to the believers at Philippi and says, “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 to have much. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.” Learning to be content with whatever I have is a pretty good definition of gratitude, as far as I'm concerned, but how we get there is a bit more complicated.**

**I had a wonderful experience the week before this past one: I was able to spend two nights and part of three days at GilChrist Retreat Center in Three Rivers, Michigan. I had not been there before; I was not going for any structured program or a certain activity, although I did have a friend coming up a day after I got there. I don't want to imply that I was roughing it -- this was nothing like wilderness camping -- I**

**was in a single-room house with heat and running water, but there were some things which made it a bit of deal, especially since I wasn't sure what to expect: I had to bring all my own food, and I had to hike anything I brought back to wherever it was that I was staying. This meant that I had to actually think through how much I would need -- including enough to be able to share with my friend -- and how much I could plausibly leave behind. How many books? How many pairs of shoes? How much food?**

**Of course, I was thinking about this Philippians passage while I was reading and praying and tramping around through the snowy woods. And here is what I realized: maybe it's something you have already figured out, or have known all along -- I hope so. The enemy of gratitude, the thing which keeps us from being content, is not having little or being hungry; the enemy of gratitude is taking things for granted. I couldn't find a single- word term which captured the quality of taking things for granted, but here are some dictionary definitions:**

**To take things for granted is to expect something always to happen or exist in a particular way.**

**To take something for granted is a failure to properly appreciate something or someone, especially as a result of overfamiliarity. To give little attention to, or to underestimate the value of.**

**What I realized is that the people who are least likely to be grateful for food are not those are in need. The people who are least likely to be grateful for food are those who have never been hungry. These are the folks who are sit around a table covered with a Thanksgiving feast and complain that the turkey is a little dry this year, or that I like mom's pie crust better than this one. In my experience -- although I have limited experience -- people who are hungry don't complain about the food; they're just grateful to have something to eat.**

**Of course, we take things for granted every day. We don't wake up amazed every morning that we there's heat in the house, or that we have a service which picks up our trash. Although when there was not heat at the McFadden house last weekend and it was 48 degrees on Sunday morning, that got our attention: and we were grateful when the heating guy showed up. If you have to carry your own trash ¼ mi. to be recycled or composted, it makes you think differently about what you use and what you discard without a thought. I believe that caring for creation is directly related to gratitude about what we have been given, and what we take for granted and expect to exist in the way that it always has.**

**Of course, there's a theological element to gratitude, and we don't have to look any further than the next verse in order to find it. I know from our Bible study groups several years ago that Philippians 4:13 is a favorite verse for Ray Bode, and at least on other person at Creekside who routinely signs off text messages with simply 4:13. We need to be careful about basing an entire theological perspective on a single verse, which is why I wanted to begin with a broader context. I also looked this verse up in several translations which I want to share with you, because I think they help to give us a more balanced perspective.**

**Philippians 4:13 King James Version**

**I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me. KJV**

**I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. NKJV**

**I have strength for everything in the one who gives me power.  
NTE**

**I can make it through anything in the One who makes me who I  
am. MSG (paraphrase)**

**I can do everything God asks me to with the help of Christ who  
gives me the strength and power. TLB**

**My concern about a verse like Phil 4:13, is that taken out of context, it could sound like we can do whatever we want and Christ will provide some kind of super-power: the ability to leap tall building in a single bound, or something like that. I don't think that's Paul's intention. If it were, it would not make sense for Paul to be writing that from prison: he could have just bent the bars of his cell window and slid out, or made himself teeny tiny and walked out. This verse *cannot* mean: If I believe in Christ I'll be able to do whatever I want. Not only is that terrible theology, we can look around us and see that it simply isn't true: people of faith get cancer and die, or even worse, watch people they love suffer and die. Natural disasters and accidents happen and leave us powerless and grieving. Our actions or inaction may or may not contribute to those things, but I do not believe God gives us either disasters or natural disasters to teach us a lesson or to punish us.**

**Here's what God does give us: gratitude. It is a super power, but not in the conventional sense. Gratitude is the realization that through Christ, we have the strength to get through anything life sends us; whatever God asks of us. Every single person over the age of two years old or so has been hit with the reality that things didn't go like we expected. That despite our most fervent wishes and efforts, the universe has not been arranged for our convenience according to our plans. Gratitude -- and maturity-- begin when we realize even when we have to adapt and change, we can still be content. This is the secret which Paul discovered in a Roman prison. He had to have been poor**

**and hungry and alone. And this is the place he realizes that he can rejoice in the Lord always because he can get through anything with Christ's strength, even being poor and hungry and alone.**

**I have wondered, especially when I have come to this passage feeling battered and bruised, if Paul was actually feeling joy and contentment in prison, or if he wrote this because he knew it is how he ought to feel. I have come to the conclusion that not only is this impossible to determine, it doesn't make a difference. The test of gratitude is not when we're sitting in a warm home surrounded by people we love, preparing to eat way more food than we need. The power of gratitude is to take an experience when we are cold and hungry and at the end of our resources, and to believe that by the grace of God we will make it through. That strength may come from people and places which we do not expect, but that is the work of Christ, not our own power. Sometimes knowing that we ought to believe that, and acting like we *do* believe that are the first steps to that power and grace becoming a reality which we acknowledge with gratitude.**

**At our congregational meeting last Sunday, Ron Nicodemus our Board chair, presented me with a Wonder Woman outfit. I don't think I will ever be able to fit into that outfit -- especially not with Thanksgiving right around the corner -- but I do have a super-power. Instead of Wonder Woman, I pray that I will be 4:13 Woman: taking the power of Christ to this congregation and our community to do whatever God asks us. I hope you will join me: with great power comes great gratitude. Amen.**