

Sermon: October 13th, 2019- Thanksgiving- Focus passage Philippians 4: 4-9

Imagine for me this morning, if you would, a recent bad day. Maybe you woke up and looked outside to yet another wet field that desperately needed to be harvested. Maybe as you walked in the kitchen there wasn't any coffee left in the tin and without coffee yikes. Or maybe you forgot about a meeting and were not able to make arrangements in time. Maybe you fought with your spouse the moment you arrived home from work. Maybe your kids were just grinding your gears. Maybe you needed more time to make a big decision, but that decision was needed yesterday. Or maybe it was something even more serious like you woke up with the reality that you loved one was no longer with you. Or as you climbed into your car after your appointment the voice of your doctor sharing such hard news was still ringing in your ears. I wonder how you felt on that day? I wonder if that moment cast a shadow upon the rest of your day or maybe multiple days?

I want you to think about this morning, and yes I am fully aware that today is thanksgiving Sunday and this seems a harsh way for me to begin my reflection, but I really want you to pay attention to how you felt in that moments and important how those feelings cause you to respond to the people around you for

the remainder of the day. Think about that while I share with you again the words St. Paul share with the community in Philippi.

Read Philippians 4: 4-9 again

Thinking about the day I have asked you to think about, would you have been able to rejoice in the Lord? Where you able to think about the good things that were all around you? And could you offer your thanks to God in those moments? A recent bad day for me which I imagined, there is not a chance I did that; I am not proud of that but one event shadowed my entire day. And so, its easy I think to say well sorry Paul, sometimes it not easy to rejoice and be thankful, sometimes life is hard, sometimes it bogs you down.

The problem with that though, is with just a little bit of research we quickly discover that almost all scholars agree that when St. Paul penned those words to the community in Philippi, to rejoice and give thanks that he was in prison. I will give you a moment to let that sink in. He was in prison, likely in Rome, a prisoner of faith; he had been imprisoned for believing in Jesus Christ and for preaching that message. It's not unfair to expect that the conditions he was living in were not comfortable. He may have been imprisoned with all manner of people, some deserving, most not. He likely had the thought in his heart that this prison may be

the last stop before he was put to death for his beliefs and yet he is given the chance in that moment to send a hand written letter to the Christian community in Philippi; a community of people he had visited with and worshipped with, a group of people who likely had heard of his imprisonment and yet importantly a group of people who were being persecuted for the same reasons that he found himself imprisoned for. That sounds like a start of a pretty bad day doesn't it? Waking up in prison, being persecuted not for anything you have done wrong, but for your faith and then needing to say something to a whole community of people, worried about you, while facing the same lot in life you are currently living.

St. Paul in that moment made a choice, he chose to write a letter that said, "Rejoice in the Lord always." You will note it doesn't say sometimes, rejoice in the Lord sometimes; it doesn't say rejoice in the Lord when you feel like it. It doesn't say rejoice in the Lord when everything turns out right, nor does it say wait until the specific day in your calendar reminds you that you need to rejoice; it says rejoice in the Lord always. St. Paul chose to write that letter to a community in turmoil, a community that was deeply worried for themselves and for him, he could have chosen to say, "Beloved pray for me and yourselves." But no, he chose to say, "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." In the face of great anxiousness, fear, and turmoil he chose to respond with joy, hope and gratitude.

I have often thought about how there are many things in all of lives, sometimes really horrible things that we cannot control. We think we can control our lives and the lives of those around us, in fact we take great efforts to do so, but the reality of this life is that there are so many unknown variables at play every single day, and we cannot control the outcomes of the days we have. Have you ever found yourself sitting somewhere and thinking "How did I get to this moment? I woke up everything was good, and then one phone call and WHAM everything has changed." We cannot control those things. But do you know what we do have control over, like St. Paul we have control over how we respond to the situations around us. We have control in how we move forward from those moments. Someone more articulate than I am said it this way, "We cannot revoke what has happened at the level of event, but we can rework it at the level of significance, and that choice -- how we respond to whatever happens -- makes all the difference in the world."

I would like to suggest that that is what Thanksgiving is all about, rejoicing everyday in the Lord. For one day a year we do this really well. We offer our thanks to God for the tremendous blessings in our lives, the abundance of food on our tables, the company of friends and neighbours, the love of our families; some even partake in the tradition to name something your thankful for out loud. And not only do we offer our gratitude we respond in gratitude as well. We share our gifts more abundantly then other days, we welcome others to our tables, we drop food off at the foodbank, we make sure to give back for the blessings in our lives, for this one day we get it. And that is all good and wonderful, but we must also choose to do this everyday.

How do we choose to respond with joy when the field didn't get worked, when the coffee wasn't there, when the reminder of what we have lost is staring us right in the face, how do choose to respond with gratitude in those times? More often then not we choose to let those moments control us, we let the dark clouds fill our day and everything that comes after the event is overshadowed, controlled, by that event, that moment; we choose to let that thing that likely we had no control over what so ever, control us. And yet our faith, my friends asks something different of us, doesn't it? Our faith asks us to be hope filled people. To live in joy and love. St. Paul certainly models a behaviour that our faith in

Christ asks of us, which is to rejoice in the Lord always. To find whatever is good and just and beautiful and to be grateful for that. To offer our thanksgivings to God for that. That I believe is how we live into these words from Paul. When faced with a situation that is beyond our control, we must learn to respond in grace and love.

Let me give you an example of how this has happened in my life. Last month my wife and children and I were standing, along with the rest of my wife's family at the graveside of my father in-law. The Roman Catholic priest was saying the prayers and was anointing the urn with holy water; casting it into the grave and around the grave. It was a really sad moment. The grief was visible on everyone's faces and you could feel it. But my three-year-old nephew was watching all of this quite intently and while the priest was anointing the urn, he suddenly noticed a plastic flower stand next to the grave which was filled with water, but no flowers. In what seemed a split second my nephew grabbed the flower stand picked it up and dumped the water into the grave and all over the urn. The priest had done it, why couldn't he. What followed was a moment of shock, but then we all burst into laughter. In this incredibly sad moment, the response could have been to live out of that sadness to scold him, to be angry with him for doing what he did or to pull him away from the graveside. The priest

could have made a big fuss about the water, we could have remained gripped by the sadness, but instead everyone chose to laugh, everyone rejoiced and were all thankful for that moment.

It's situations like that that I believe St. Paul words to the community to Philippi to rejoice, have great meaning. But its not just in the hard or harsh times of life where we need to choose to rejoice. We need to rejoice always, which means in the harsh times and the wonderful times. To constantly be aware of how precious life is and to constantly find the ways to lift ourselves and others up, to comment on the goodness that we see all around us; to love more fully, to laugh more deeply, to be thankful for the presence of God's grace and love in our lives. We cannot control what life presents us, but we absolutely can choose how we respond and how we respond makes all the difference in the world. May we in all times, find the courage and the strength and the hope to chose as St. Paul suggests, to rejoice in the Lord always. May it be so with us on this Thanksgiving Sunday, but importantly may it be so with us everyday that follows. Thanks be to God. Amen.

