

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Saying Grace for the Whole Universe”**

**Psalm 111
Ephesians 5:15 – 20**

August 16, 2015

There’s a long-running joke in the Boyer family... that centers around the way we say grace before our meals. When our kids were growing up, and *they* said grace, it was always something short, sweet, and simple.

God is great, God is good, and we thank Him for our food; by His hands, all our fed; give us Lord our daily bread. Amen. Or, Rub-a-dub-dub, thanks for the grub! Yay God! Or, Over the teeth and through the gums, look out stomach, here it comes! Amen! Simple; direct; to the point.

But whenever Sylvia or I said grace (and, really, Sylvia was usually the biggest culprit here), the prayer was always quite a bit more expansive. *Lord, we give you thanks for this beautiful day, and the opportunity to eat this meal together as a family. We thank you for bringing us safely home, and for all the blessings that we’ve enjoyed today. Be with* (insert name of friend or family member here) *and help him/her to recover from his/her* (insert illness, injury, or problem here.) *And thank you, Lord, for the food that we are about to eat. In Jesus’ name we pray, amen.*

A grace like *that*, especially in a restaurant or other public place, always provoked much eye-rolling and head-shaking by our kids. And, occasionally, the prayer was so long that we actually forgot to give thanks for the food... which, in theory, was the whole reason for offering the prayer in the first place. And, whenever that happened, one of the kids was quick to add, “And, uh, thanks for the food, Lord!” Which always resulted in much mirth and hilarity around the dinner table.

And so now, *whenever* we say grace, no matter how long or short the prayer might be... someone always tacks on “and thank you, Lord, for the food,” after the grace-prayer has said “amen.” As I said, this has become a longstanding joke among us... a piece of original Boyer family tradition. And I have no doubt that our kids will pass it on to their own kids... and a hundred years from now, some Boyer somewhere will still be adding, “And thank you, God, for the food” after the “amen” is said at grace!

I was thinking this week about our sometimes-extensive giving of thanks at mealtime... as I reflected on our lesson for this morning from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. Because from Paul’s perspective, at least, the giving of thanks for a wide range of assorted and sundry things, might not be so out of place after all. In a section toward the end of the letter, in which he emphasizes the need to be careful and diligent and wise in our practice of our faith... Paul reminds his readers of the importance of being *thankful* to God amid all the ups and downs, and joys and challenges which fill up our workaday life.

Paul has just stressed to his formerly pagan, but now newly minted Christian friends, that the lure of sin and evil and the debauched lifestyles to which they lead... will always be a potential stumbling block to their efforts at faithful discipleship. And we know how that can be, right? Just when you think you’ve got the upper hand on some sinful behavior or other, it comes up out of

nowhere and bites you on the fanny... causing us all kinds of problems. Well, in light of this reality, Paul tells them to keep their eyes open and their wits about them, and to pay close attention to the possible pitfalls which may be on the horizon... and even *closer* attention to the teachings of Jesus which can keep them from falling headfirst into them. And a big part of the way in which they're to engage in this effort to pay close attention... is by regularly reminding themselves of God's grace, God's love, God's gifts, and the new way of life that fits with God's kingdom.

So, Paul encourages them, *“Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord...”*

And then he concludes with this:

“Always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

That's pretty sane and straightforward advice, right? If you want to avoid evil and live a faithful Christian life, then be wise... stay attentive to God's will... offer the Lord your praise... and always be thankful to Him. Makes a lot of sense, I think. Well, all except for that last part... about always being thankful. Not that we shouldn't be thankful to God for our many gifts and blessings; of course we should! But it's the way that Paul puts it that gives us some pause to think: *“always giving thanks to God the Father... for everything.”*

For everything? Really? Not just the blessings and good stuff... but everything else, too? Is that really what Paul has in mind here? Like an over-zealous parent thanking God for everything but the kitchen sink while saying grace over a taco salad, are we supposed to thank God for *all* the assorted stuff that happens in our life... good, bad, and otherwise? It's a fair question; because, although it may be easy to say thank-you for the things in our lives that bring us joy and comfort and security... it's another matter entirely to give thanks for the things that bring us pain, heartache, and anxiety. So, what was Paul really getting at here?

Well, to begin with, I don't think Paul meant that we should be a bunch of masochists... bravely saying, “Gee, thanks!” every time something bad happens to us. This isn't a call to deny our normal human feelings, and act like hurtful things don't really bother us. The pages of the Bible are full of examples of God's people expressing grief, anguish, and even outrage at one setback or adversity or other; and far from sounding “thankful,” these people sound positively despairing over the Lord's seeming lack of concern for the difficulty of their situation.

Hey, even Jesus Himself cried out from the cross, in a quotation from Psalm 22, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* Whatever else you want to call that anguished lament, it certainly wasn't an expression of thankfulness. Jesus was hurting and heartbroken... and He wanted to let His Father know it.

So, I really don't think that Paul is asking us to be thankful for our injuries, per se. But, that said, I also think that there's more to this call to thankfulness than merely being grateful for the good things in life; I mean, there's nothing particularly Christian about doing that... and even atheists and agnostics experience gratitude when something good happens to them.

No, I think that what Paul has in mind here is that we should be thankful for the fact that we live every day within the loving providence of God; and that this is true, even when we're

having the worst day of our life. Paul means that, even when we're walking through the valley of some sorrow or other, God is still right there with us; our Father has not abandoned us; our lives still matter to Him greatly. And it's *that*, for which we should be thankful.

In good times, and in hard times, God has His loving arms around us; and because of that we can be thankful for everything... because *in* everything, *in* all the good and bad days which make up our human lives, God continues to work His purpose out with us. And we can trust that, no matter what happens, we are still His beloved children; we're still His forgiven people; we're still citizens of His heavenly kingdom; and no power in the universe will ever be able to change that.

You see, when Paul challenged his friends in Ephesus, and we here this morning, to be thankful for everything, he's *really* challenging us to have a particular worldview; a particular understanding of the way life really is; a particular point of view that truly realizes that our life with our Lord consists in a whole lot more than just weighing up the good stuff, and the bad stuff, and then trying to figure out whether God really cares for us or not.

What Paul's saying is that God's eternal love for us *surpasses* the good and bad things of this life; he's saying that it transcends or goes *beyond* the happy and sad times of our life. Not that those sad times and bad days don't matter; they *do* matter... to us, and to God. But the bad stuff can't undo our relationship with God; it can't undermine God's care for us; it can't separate us from the love of God that we have found in Christ Jesus our Lord. And that's why Paul can say "be thankful for everything..." be thankful *in* everything... be thankful, because there is *no*-thing that is ever going to cause God to stop loving and looking out for you.

That's the attitude; that's the perspective, the way of looking at life, that Paul was commending to the Ephesian Christians. And he commends it to us as well, as we live out our faith here in Southampton, New York.

So, to wrap things up, what are some practical suggestions that we can take from this lesson on being thankful in, and for, all things? Well, for one thing, we can try to maintain a general, overall "attitude of gratitude" as we make our way through life; seeing the glass as being half full, as it were, rather than half empty. We can try to focus on the positive, on the good, a little bit more... and fret over the bad and the negative, a little bit less. I know that I, personally, need to do a better job of that; maybe some of you do, too.

Second, we can also remind ourselves every day that, no matter how difficult our life may be from time to time, we have far more to be thankful for than we usually realize. I mean, most of us are awash in an ocean of good gifts and blessings... which we often fail to see because we're distracted, overworked, stressed out, or just too used to getting our own way. I suppose that we're all guilty to some extent of taking our blessings for granted; so it's a good faith-discipline to take a step back, and actually "count our blessings" once in a while... so we remember just how much we really do have for which to be thankful.

Finally, I think it's a good discipline for us to recall, every so often, that although our Heavenly Father does delight in blessing us and doing us good, He's never promised us a life free from heartache and suffering. As we all know from firsthand personal experience, no matter how many good things come our way in life... challenging times are also going to come; it's just a part of the way life is. Even Christian life.

To accept this painful truth, and to be able to maintain a grateful attitude toward God in spite of it, is a sign of genuine spiritual growth and maturity. And it's also a sign that we're truly starting to understand what the Christian life is really all about.

So, the next time you say grace before a meal, don't be afraid to throw in a word of thanks for things far beyond the dinner table. For to do so, is to put into action one of our main convictions as Christian disciples.

Just don't forget to thank God for the food!

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!