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Christ the King & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Cody & Powell, WY

Thanksgiving Eve

November 22, 2023

Text: Philippians 4:6–20

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

It's very evident the apostle Paul loved the Philippian congregation. Although Paul was under house arrest, probably in Rome, he rejoiced in the on-going, sincere faithfulness clearly manifested in the lives of the saints in Philippi. They weren't ashamed of Paul's imprisonment; they knew he was suffering for righteousness' sake because of his faithful proclamation of Christ Jesus and His gospel. Paul's imprisonment seems to have made them bolder in their Christian confession. In chapter 1:14, Paul wrote, "And most of the brothers having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear." That's an amazing, maybe even surprising, result of suffering faithfully as a Christian. The Christians near Paul in Rome were strengthened and encouraged by his imprisonment. The Philippian Christians, though many, many hundreds of miles away from Paul, were reinvigorated in their love for Paul and the Lord Jesus Christ. As a result, God's Word spread even further because of Paul's unjust imprisonment and the Christians' joyful response to God's work in the world.

Renewed in courage and joy, the Philippian congregation sent Epaphroditus, one of their own members, possibly a pastor, to give Paul gifts of support to secure him as much as possible during his imprisonment. Such a gift was a material representation of their steadfast love for Paul, and more importantly, for Christ Jesus. Paul described their gifts as "a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God (4:18).

On this Thanksgiving Eve, I want to encourage you and commend you all for your ongoing, sacrificial devotion to your families, your church, and most especially, your Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. All that you do in Christ's

name according to His Word, is pleasing to our Lord. Such good works, many of which are unknown to the world but well known to God, are precious beyond compare. And we mustn't overlook the fact many of your good works are sacrificial. Such sacrificial works reflect the mind of Christ Jesus who emptied Himself when He came in human likeness, taking on the form of a servant, becoming obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:7–8). That's the mindset we are to have and which was given to us through our baptism into Christ. Being of the same mind and having the same love as Christ, we Christians consider others more significant than ourselves, as Paul says in Philippians 2:3. This mindset of others first and more significant than ourselves is exemplified and beautifully seen in the love and sacrificial concern Paul and the Philippians shared between each other. And which I have witnessed amongst the members of this wonderful congregation.

However, it must be said such spiritual and material devotion weren't without risks, however. Either during the journey to Rome or shortly after his arrival, Epaphroditus became sick. He almost died because of his love for Paul and the congregation whom he represented. Listen to Paul's tender words of commendation and devotion written in praise of Epaphroditus in Philippians 2:25–30:

²⁵I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, ²⁶for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. ²⁷Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. ²⁸I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. ²⁹So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, ³⁰for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.

On this Thanksgiving Eve, I want to highlight a real-life story from the Bible to demonstrate why we Christians are a thanksgiving people. Paul was

thankful for Epaphroditus and the Philippian congregation because of their Christian confession of faith and love for Jesus. The congregational members were thankful for Paul and willingly gave of themselves on his behalf. Through him and his gospel ministry, they learned and experienced the saving grace and steadfast love of Christ Jesus. Epaphroditus was willing to die in loving service to Paul, the Philippian congregation, and most certainly, his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. What's central to all this joy and thanksgiving is Jesus. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, we follow Christ's way of life and thought. He's the foundational source and reason for our sacrificial devotion and lives of thankfulness.

It's because of Jesus and all that He did to redeem us from the misery of sin and the fear of death that we give thanks to God everyday of our lives. Jesus shed His blood and gave His life in love for each of us so that joy, peace, and thanksgiving can fill our hearts and minds. Not just one Thursday in November but all the time. We Christians are a thanksgiving people from beginning to end. We always have been. And we will spend eternity expressing and living in divine thanksgiving that will have no end. Paul, Epaphroditus, the Philippian and Roman Christians, and all Christians throughout the ages give their lives in love with thanksgiving because of the superabundance of love experienced in Jesus.

Because of Jesus, Paul reminded the Philippian Christians and us here tonight in Philippians 4:6 that we ought not "be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made to known to God." That's an amazing statement. Don't be anxious about anything! Don't worry about me in prison. Christ is taking care of me through you Philippians and others. That tangible gift is really Christ working through God's people. Such expressions are a beautiful, mysterious combination of God's spiritual life with His gifts of earthly life; body and Spirit intermingled in harmony. Because of Christ Jesus, don't be distressed over Epaphroditus. Even though he almost died, his service was completed faithfully and joyfully on behalf of you Philippians and in unswerving love for Jesus.

Because of Jesus, you 21st century American Christians ought not be anxious. You have a loving heavenly Father who oversees and directs all things through His Son, Christ Jesus, for your sake and the sake of His Church. In the midst of everything – that’s the comprehensive language Paul uses, in everything (good, bad, joy, sadness, life, death, external, internal, heaven, earth, literally in everything) we bring our prayers and supplications to God the Father. The challenges you face are real! We don’t pretend otherwise. But the Savior whom we serve is greater than all of heaven and earth. Tonight’s reading from Philippians 4 concludes with these unchanging words of promise, “And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (vs. 19). Your very real, pressing needs cannot exhaust the riches of God’s glory in Christ.

Because of Jesus we are a thanksgiving people. We Christians have a unique, Christian mindset that gives thanks to God in all things. The good works we do for one another are a delight even when sacrificial. It’s all because of Jesus. He gives everything we do significance and value far beyond any worldly standard. Enjoy especially tomorrow’s day of Thanksgiving. Your sacrifices of prayer, praise, thanksgiving, and service to one another are well pleasing and acceptable to God. Christ Jesus is at work in and through you. A blessed Thanksgiving to you all ...

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.