

WGUMC November 18, 2012 Philippians 4:1,4-7; 10-20
"Thanksgiving in Theory and Practice"

We are approaching the holiday season. And they tell us that we are nearing a fiscal cliff. The politicians are pushing for their favorite theories on how best to help the economy. But the one theory I haven't heard anyone talking about is the Thanksgiving theory.

Probably because I just made it up. But that's what I was thinking as I was reading Paul's letter to the Philippians. What if our lives were organized not around *getting things* but *giving thanks*? What if our economy were structured not to increase profits but to amplify praise? I think that I may need a very large grant to study this more thoroughly, but here's some initial thoughts about Paul's program for real prosperity.

The first principle of Thanksgiving theory is: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice." In other words, if you want to improve your lot in life, if you want a lot more life, find your joy in the Lord not in your lifestyle.

When I was in seminary, I took a trip to Mexico. In Mexico City, we worshiped at *una iglesia* that had been badly damaged in the 1982 earthquake. The roof had collapsed over part of the sanctuary, and seven years later, there were still no funds to fix it. But that didn't stop folks from rejoicing in the Lord and praising God with tambourines and maracas, drums and guitars, and singing, clapping and dancing. Psalm 150 says: "Praise God in his sanctuary; praise God in his mighty firmament!" And, with no roof overhead to obstruct their view, those *mexicanos* could do both at the same time!

We *norteamericanos* can learn a lot about rejoicing in the Lord **always**, no matter what we have or don't have. But to do that, we're going to need the second principle of Thanksgiving theory: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God." Paul says, "Don't worry," because what is a burden for you is an opportunity for God to bless you. So,

whenever you pray, also give thanks, because the blessing is already headed your way.

Years ago in Eugene, I was visiting a woman who was scheduled to have double knee replacement surgery. She was living in excruciating pain, and I asked her if she were having trouble sleeping. She told me that she had a method for getting to sleep. Every night when she got into bed, she would make a list of all the things she was thankful for, starting with the first letter of the alphabet. And by the time she got to the letter Z, she was making zzzzzzz. So, you see, it is true: "In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds [and your knees] in Christ Jesus."

There is, in fact, scientific evidence that giving thanks is good for you. Robert Emmons is a professor of psychology at UC Davis, and he's written book called *Thanks! How the New*

Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier. His book is based on studies in which he asked half the participants to write down five things they were thankful for each day and the other half to write down five complaints they had each day. Well, lo and behold, the thankful folks reported measurable improvements in their physical, psychological and social wellbeing. I have news for Prof. Emmons: Your new science is very old wisdom.

As people of faith, we are taught to thank God for everything, because there isn't anything that God can't turn into a gift. I have a friend who was struggling to stay in a marriage, praying to make it work. They had been in counseling, but her husband wasn't helping much, until his cancer returned. As his illness began to beat him down, his heart began to open up. For the first time in his life, he focused on his relationship with his wife. And in those hard months to follow, there was love and there was forgiveness and then there was a funeral. And I marveled as my friend gave thanks for the grace in the

midst of her grief. After all those years of anger and hurt, her heart was finally at peace. "And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Thanksgiving may sound easy in theory, but it's pretty challenging in practice. How did Paul do it? For that, we turn to the third principle of Thanksgiving theory: be content with what you have. Now, what Paul had was a lot of suffering. In 2 Corinthians, he boasts about how he had been imprisoned countless times, received 40 lashes five times, beaten with rods three times, shipwrecked three times, stoned once. In his own words, he was "in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold

and naked." [2 Corinthians 11:24-27] I bet it was uphill both ways, too!

If nothing else, Paul had plenty of opportunity to test his Thanksgiving theory. And what did he learn? "I have learned to be content with whatever I have...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."

That's a secret most Americans haven't learned yet. But I'm trying. After all of my talk of going for the gold and reaching our goal, I was determined to be content with the results of our stewardship campaign, whatever they might be. Well, I'm very pleased that we are just over the \$300,000 mark, and we are still expecting some more pledges to come in. We already have an increase of about 20% or \$50,000 over last year. Well done, good and faithful givers! And even though we are still short of a fully-funded budget, even though we're going to have a "come to Jesus" meeting in the coming weeks

to balance it, I can give God thanks. For if we had raised all \$350,000, then we would've been tempted to give ourselves the credit for it. We'd be thinking, "We can do all things" and forgetting the part about "through Christ who strengthens us." Instead, falling somewhat short of our goal allows us to fall entirely on God's grace.

So, you see, we can rejoice in the Lord always, giving thanks in any and all circumstances. And yes, I am content with what we have: generous pledgers and a good group of leaders and some clear and attainable goals for this next year. Mostly, I'm grateful for all of you.

I'm also excited for you. After thanking the Philippians for their support, Paul said to them that he didn't so much seek their gifts as the profit that was accumulating to their account because they were giving. By giving to the church, you are not only practicing thanksgiving, but you are growing in grace, and whether you know it or not, you are accumulating blessings.

Even more than that, you are increasing your capacity to be a blessing. On that measure, we can look forward to a very prosperous year. Tell that to the politicians in Washington. Tell them we have a theory for them. Let's practice it. Then we will really mean it when we say, "Happy Thanksgiving."