

Thanksgiving Eve

Philippians 4:6-20

In my November newsletter, I mentioned a quote from Dr. Jordan Peterson, “Be grateful in spite of your suffering.” I thought to myself, what an appropriate theme for Thanksgiving this year. As COVID continues to dominate the activities of our lives and the health of many including my own father, I thought it appropriate to focus on that for which I am grateful, not in spite of COVID, but in regard to COVID.

The year 2020 has brought many changes and challenges we have been forced to endure, I believe it is appropriate to remember the blessings which have also come in spite of and because of suffering.

Here at ORLC, we have been blessed to continue to have our regularly scheduled Divine Services on Saturday and Sunday since June. But in April and May, we discovered what a blessing it is to receive the Sacrament in the middle of the week when COVID restrictions caused us to have to be creative with communion distribution due to limitations on having regular gatherings.

We have been very blessed that we have been able to reach more people through the broadcast of the service on Facebook Live. (Welcome to those

joining us this evening via the Internet.) Having the capability of broadcasting already in place is something for which I have given thanks many times, especially in the past nine months. Numerous people have told me that having a full worship service broadcast with music and singing was important in helping them cope with the isolation and worry. I am grateful that God allowed us to provide the Gospel and those listening at home were allowed to have a hint of normalcy through the familiarity of hymns and liturgy.

I am grateful that some of those who discovered our broadcast in recent months have remained faithful participants of worship and Bible class. It is a blessing to see the Gospel reach beyond our normal borders. Some of our local families still choose to worship with us via Facebook and not in person (and understandably so), and I am grateful for this reminder of how much I miss being with people.

In my October newsletter, I wrote about how, from a personal growth standpoint, 2020 has been one of my best years. I believe this year brought me even closer to my family, and I am truly grateful for the opportunity to teach Bible class in a way which I never considered before. And now the fruit of my labor in preparing the handouts consisting of Scripture and Luther's writings and the writings of other scholars which we have been examining are now going to be translated by my friend Rev. Peter Maganda into the language of the people in Uganda and may end up being instructional material for the Seminary of which he is the Dean.

I made it a point to only use material which has passed doctrinal review, for which I am very thankful God led me to choose this path for teaching. I will let you in on a little secret. I chose to switch up what I wanted to do for Bible class because, in September of 2019, Pastor Michael Simminger, who has since moved away to be with his family, took me aside one Sunday morning and justifiably chastised me for not putting in as much preparation for Bible class as I do sermon preparation. The contrast was stark, and he was absolutely correct.

I am so thankful that he cared enough about me and the proclamation of the Word that he gave me the constructive criticism I deserved. Be thankful when your brother takes the speck out of your eye so that you may see clearly.

His criticism of me gave me a six month head start on preparing materials so that when we began our 15 days to flatten the curve, I could have Bible class five days a week in the hope of keeping everyone connected to Christ and the Church. The 15 days turned into four weeks of daily Bible class. We then shifted gears and began to offer small group communion services throughout the day on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

So what I am saying is that as Thanksgiving Day has come, I will gather with my family and I will thank God for many things, especially His reminder to be grateful in spite of suffering and to be thankful for criticism.

2020 is quite a year when criticism and suffering are that for which I am most thankful. Paul's words from Philippians apply now more than ever, "Do not be anxious about anything." The danger is that a person could hear those words

and simply treat it as a burdensome law – Suck it up; Don't be anxious. The false premise is that if you are anxious about anything going on, you must not have enough faith.

The bigger lesson from Paul is learning contentment in all situations, whether you have plenty or you are going hungry, whether you have an abundance or have real and daily needs. Do not be anxious. God is caring for you and will continue to care for you. Being content with what you have is greater than the euphoria of success. Be satisfied with what God has given you – your clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home (and those are different when you think about it. A home is more than just a roof over your head).

This Thanksgiving, take a step back and look for the good around you. We have good reason to be content. Whether you have been brought low or are abounding in success, be content that God has brought you to where you are today. Today, right now, you have either gathered in God's House or in your own house, and you are hearing the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ, and you are living under the protection of God and His gracious favor.

His protection has not failed. As we hear Paul say, and similar to how I and many other pastors conclude every sermon, "The peace of God which surpasses all understand, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." Have confidence in that, and give thanks for all the blessings of the year 2020. Amen.