

Here we are, firmly in November. The election is over, Thanksgiving looms and we are beginning to prepare for Christmas. This month, we are focusing on gratitude or being thankful. With Pastor Pat away on the mission trip this Sunday and next, you will hear from three of us on the topic of being thankful. Unique opportunity, to hear messages from three people on similar subject matter. However, as I sat down Monday to start this message, I realized that I need to check the calendar more carefully when agreeing to fill in for Pastor Pat. A message about thankfulness the first Sunday after a contentious election is not my idea of fun! I know I needed some inspiration to keep me living a life of Christian thankfulness.

There are many strategies to help us be aware of all the things we have to be thankful for in our lives. Some people write in a gratitude journal – finding something each day for which to be grateful. Some people use the alphabet through the month of November – listing all the things they are thankful for that start with each letter. You may have a different strategy to help you focus on things you should be grateful for. But all these strategies are meant to balance the negative, annoying things that happen to us every day and can cause us to feel that only bad things happened to us. They help us focus on the good things in our lives that we can often take for granted. Now, I am not saying that it is a bad idea to balance the negative things in our day by taking some extra effort to focus on the good that often gets buried under the negative. But what if God is asking more of us? What if we are called to be thankful for everything, including the negative things?

Not trying to channel Pollyanna here. Things go wrong, we find ourselves in bad situations and just “thinking positively” won’t make things better. We lose a job, we are hit with unexpected expenses, are diagnosed with a serious medical condition, we lose a loved one. Should we be thankful for these sorts of life experiences? How? How can we be thankful for life altering things that we don’t want to be experiencing? Sometimes we frame our thankfulness by thinking about how much worse an event could have been. My neighbor’s mother used to say the same thing every time my neighbor complained about the way something in her life went. Her mother would always say, “Don’t complain, there are people who have it much worse than you do.” It rained on your outdoor party? Be thankful it wasn’t a tornado. Your washing machine is broken? Be thankful you have clothes to wash. My neighbor hated this because it made her feel like her mother didn’t take her problems seriously, she never offered her any sympathy for the issue my neighbor was dealing with. Beyond the fact that this approach can annoy people by minimizing what they are going through, there are other issues. We aren’t really finding a way to be thankful in our challenging situations, we are being thankful that our situation is not as challenging as what other people are experiencing. Doesn’t that mean that we are being thankful that someone else has it worse? If we minimize our situations by comparing them to others then we aren’t looking for what God wants us to learn.

Lets look at the message Paul wrote to the church at Phillipi. *Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* This passage is most often used to exhort Christians to not worry about anything. If we pray, we will have God’s peace. In the past, this verse could have been used to encourage those suffering from mental health issues to just pray and lift themselves up by

their Bible ribbons. We know better than that now. I am not talking about that causeless, unreasonable anxiety that some suffer from. Scientific advances have helped us understand that suggesting prayer as the ONLY treatment of a mental health struggle is irresponsible. As we discuss our scripture today, I am talking about anxiety that stems from our emotional reaction to difficult situations. Even with that clarification, I wouldn't be surprised if many of us still experience anxiety about the world even when we pray in an effort to find that "Peace of God". When we read or quote these verses, we often leave off an important part: *with thanksgiving*. Wait, you may be saying, if we are anxious or worried, how can we pray with thanksgiving? Are we supposed to be thankful for the challenging situation that we find ourselves in? Are we supposed to be thankful that we are worried or anxious? That doesn't sound right....And its not.

Our anxiety levels have been high for the last five years. An unknown virus has killed over 6 million people world wide, affected the world's finances and kept people isolated and scared. There is conflict in the world that causes all peace loving people anxiety. This country has gone through two difficult elections. We have all experienced anxiety in the last few months as our country marched towards last Tuesday's elections. And none of us has been thankful for the feelings we have been muddling through. No matter who you voted for, you probably experienced significantly more anxiety over the chance of the other candidate winning during this election cycle than during other presidential elections. We have all heard things about the "other candidate" that scared us. We all heard the other candidate say things that we found appalling. We have all been living in a state of heightened anxiety for quite some time. Did you pray about the election? How did you pray? Did you pray with thanksgiving? The prayers that I lifted about our country the last few months did not include much thanksgiving. Did you pray for your candidate to win? For your candidate to convince more voters? For voters to open their eyes and see things the same way you see things? Did you pray for the other candidate to get lost in an endless, unexplored cave....no, no, that would be wrong! But did you want to let your prayers go in that direction?

Reading Phillipians 4 with an emphasis on the *thanks* part was a revelation to me. In the last decade, I have made progress in accepting the challenging parts of life as being sent by God – often because there was something He wanted me to learn. I can often, but not always, view a challenging event or encounter as coming from God and I can try to find what I am meant to learn from this situation or how I am meant to grow. But I have not been praying with *thanksgiving* when I am scared or worried or anxious. Because this is a new idea for me, I hope I can find the words to help you see what jumped out at me this week.

Paul says, "Do not be anxious".....how? We cannot stop ourselves from feeling anxious. There is no switch to turn our emotions on and off. In fact, telling someone not to feel anxious usually just makes them feel more anxious. Let's add a few more words: Do not be anxious, but in all situations, by prayer and petition....Ok, we start to see a path to our anxiety reducing, we are supposed to pray about whatever situation is causing us to feel anxious. Sometimes that works well, right? We pray and we feel more hopeful. We told God our situation and now we wait for Him to fix it. But praying for God to make our situation better doesn't always reduce our anxiety (depending on what the situation might be) and God doesn't always fix things the way we want him to fix things. Prayer is not a magic wish. Sometimes God knows that what we are asking for is not the best outcome for us. So it doesn't work to just stop feeling anxious and lifting our concerns to God in prayer doesn't always help us feel better and God doesn't always

fix things the way we want to see them fixed. How does lifting our prayers and petitions *with thanksgiving* reduce our anxiety and lead us to the peace of God?

It matters very much what we are being thankful for. Are we being thankful because we do so much for God, we volunteer in our church, we donate to the hungry and we vote so to protect those most in need. If that is the case then I am praying with thanksgiving about how good a Christian I am, certain that God will answer my prayers the way I want them answered. Sound familiar? More than once, Jesus pointed out that giving, serving and praying to show how closely you follow religious rules, is not what God wants from us. Are we being thankful because we are sure that we hold the correct position in the debate, argument or conflict? When we petition God to make our side “win” then we are being thankful that we are on the right side. We almost always assume that our position is correct in a conflict, our country is in the right in all conflicts and my church is right in how God and scripture are revealed. In most wars, both sides believe God to be on their side – and both sides cannot be “right” in God’s eyes, can they? Every religious conflict, both sides are certain that they represent the will of God. United Methodists on both sides of the issues of human sexuality believed that they represented God’s position in the disagreement. This cannot be the type of thanksgiving that Paul is telling us to pray with.

Here is my revelation: we pray with thanksgiving that God is supreme above all – even those things that seem to be out of the control of both people and God. When our prayers are infused with the knowledge that God is in charge all the time, with the thanksgiving for the knowledge that God will always take care of us, our anxiety can stop being quite so loud and overwhelming. This may not sound so revolutionary to you – you know that God is in charge of all and you know that God has promised to take care of you. But does that knowledge enter your prayers in the form of thanks, especially when you are upset, worried and scared?

If we can learn to infuse our prayers and petitions to God with thanks for who He is and what He has done in our lives, we can reduce our anxiety about what is going on around us and we can find the peace of God to lean on. The anxiety of an election is managed when we are acknowledging and thanking God for being in charge of all that can affect me in my life. When we can thank God for his loving care as we pray for the health and well being of all citizens of the world, our anxiety over epidemic and war loses its hold on us. So how can we learn to do that? If you have ever worked in education or with children, you may be aware of the “praise sandwich”. The praise sandwich starts with something that the student is doing well, followed by the area that they need improvement in and then ending with another positive statement. “I really like how you are taking your time so you can write your letters neatly. Try holding your pencil this way, it may be easier. You are doing a wonderful job keeping your letters between the lines on your paper.” The praise reminds the student where they are doing well – both at the beginning and end of the interaction. The part they need to correct, the part the student may see as criticism, is surrounded by what they do correctly. The result is that most students can hear where they need to change something without getting down on themselves and believing they will never learn the new skill. The praise “bread” shows that they are already learning the skill, they just need to refine what they are doing. What about a “thanks sandwich”? “God, I thank you for the world you gave us and for your everlasting love for all your people. I am worried because I lost my job two weeks ago and have not yet found another job. I am worried that I cannot pay my bills this month if I don’t get a job very soon. Please help me find a new job. Thank you for your constant presence in my life and your care for me in all things.” The

“thanks” bread is not to remind God of what he is doing correctly, He already knows! It is to remind US that God is in charge, God loves us, God is good and God wants good things for His people. When we surround our petitions, our worries, between thanks to God for all He is to us, our worries can start to lose their power over our emotions.

I said earlier that this idea was a revelation to me. It would have been more accurate to say that praying intentionally this way was a revelation to me. I realize that I have not been anxious over the last two elections. I have been appalled, angry, disgusted, frustrated and amazed but I have not been anxious. Somehow, even without intentionally thanking God while petitioning Him about election issues, I have found peace that God will still be in charge no matter who is the president AND He probably wants us to learn something from the long, ugly process. This week, I have been intentional in my prayers around the election and the counting of the votes. “God, I thank you for being in control, even when I cannot see your hand acting. I have such concerns for our country after this election. I have concerns for the safety of those counting votes and providing security in our nation’s capital. Thank you for being with me, protecting me and loving me. Thank you for your guiding hand in our lives.” I can’t lie to you and say prayers like this always reduce my anger and frustration. But they do help me know that we will be ok, no matter who sits in the Oval Office, because God is the One who is really in charge. He is the one that I follow, that I depend on to save me, who promises me eternal life with Him.

Friends, we have all let our anxiety affect our words and behavior in the last few months. Our fears and concerns over what could happen to our country if the “other” candidate won have been overwhelming. Otherwise kind and thoughtful people have engaged in discussions that have impacted relationships with family and friends. A little over half the country is happy and a little less than half of the country are angry and fearful. It would be understandable to assume that the next four years will continue to be rife with challenging situations and scary emotions. But they don’t have to be. If we can follow Paul’s directions to pray with thanksgiving, we can find “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, that will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” And when our hearts and minds are in Christ, protected from the world around us and the anxiety that seems to control our words, we will no longer worry about the things around us that we cannot control. We will stay focused on how much God has done for us and all the things he has promised to do to take care of us.

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. WE will say it again: Rejoice! And be thankful
And the God of peace will be with you.