

“Thanks-Giving” (Phil. 4:4-7)

Nov. 19, 2023

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
(NRSVUE)

What would you like to write if you summarize your life in five chapters? The late poet Portia Nelson (1920-2001) wrote her life journey in five chapters. Anybody ever heard it?

Nelson was an American pop singer, actress, songwriter, and author. She fought multiple types of cancers beginning when she was 53. At 57, she published her best-selling book, *There's a Hole in My Sidewalk*. One of the poems in the book was titled “Autobiography in Five Short Chapters.”

Let me read the poem:

Chapter I

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost ... I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes me forever to find a way out.

Chapter II

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place.
But it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

Chapter III

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in ... it's a habit.

My eyes are open.
 I know where I am.
 It is *my* fault.
 I get out immediately.

Chapter IV

I walk down the same street.
 There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
 I walk around it.

Chapter V

I walk down another street.

We don't know how many holes Nelson encountered in her eighty years of life, but she said in this poem that her eyes were open and she could notice her habit of falling into the same deep hole. She could eventually walk down a new way, with a renewed vision of her life journey.

Paul (whose Jewish name was "Saul") began to live his Chapter V after meeting the risen Christ. Paul was the most notorious persecutor of Christians. I will read part of Acts 8 that describes how eagerly Paul captured and imprisoned those followers of Jesus: Paul "went wild, devastating the church, entering house after house after house, dragging men and women off to jail." (Acts 8:3 MSG)

If someone who knew Paul before his conversion had read the letter to the Philippians, s/he would have been stunned. After meeting the risen Christ, Paul came out of the deep hole. Paul began to walk down another street. Paul lived a new life in Christ, testifying about the risen Christ everywhere.

In Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians, Paul repeatedly invited Philippian Christians to "rejoice in the Lord." "Rejoice in the Lord!" Paul wrote this letter while he was in prison and in a desperate situation, not knowing how long he would be in prison or if he would survive. Paul was inviting the Philippian siblings to stand firm in the Lord as they were also experiencing persecution.

Paul said, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Paul didn't want the Philippian community of faith to be discouraged and victimized by its challenges within and around the church. Paul encouraged them to find peace in God and stand firm in faith instead of being timid and anxious, reminding them "the Lord is near," which implies that the day of God's ultimate, incalculable day of grace can be any moment.

Paul invited them to pray with thanksgiving! Let me say it again. Paul invited them (and all of us) to pray with thanksgiving instead of living with an anxious heart. Paul said, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving..." Paul does not separate 'prayer and supplication' from thanksgiving.

Just as Jesus prayed earnestly to God, seeking God's will, saying "Not my will, but yours be done," Paul was also seeking God's will first. Even in the midst of afflictions in prison, his prayers were filled with joy, thanksgiving, and confidence in God.

That's why Carl R. Holladay, a New Testament scholar, reminds us that Paul's prayer and supplication in Philippians should not justify our urge toward 'self-wish and self-fulfillment' expressed in the form of prayers. Inviting us to pray with a grateful heart, Holladay said, "our prayers can hardly become so, if they are prayed as expressions of thanksgiving to God." For Paul, thanksgiving is our response to God's abundant gift, and most of all, God's self-giving love through Jesus Christ.

Paul invites us to give thanks to God's loving presence in every situation, in every corner of our lives, whether good or challenging. Remembering that we are living in the ocean of God's grace. In other words, God's grace is already given to us before we notice it or ask for it. What we need to do is simply to open our mouths with a grateful and joyful heart. No wonder we can be gentler to one another and to ourselves because, as John Wesley believed, our gentleness is the fruit of joy in the Lord.

Paul's invitation for Philippian believers to rejoice, pray, and give thanks is in concert with his RPG invitation to Thessalonian siblings (1 Thes. 5:16-22). I believe Paul's RPG exhortation is also an invitation to the life of true happiness. Do you remember the RPG invitation? R stands for "Rejoice always;" P for "Pray without ceasing," G for "Give thanks in all circumstances." I believe Paul still invites us to practice his RPG invitation in all circumstances.

Today we celebrate Thanksgiving Sunday. Gratitude is God's gift embedded in our DNA, although we often put it in a closet and forget. Interestingly, over the decades, studies have consistently found that people who practice gratitude report "fewer symptoms of illness (including depression), more generous behavior, increasing personal and relational well-being, and many other benefits." Research shows that "consciously cultivating an attitude of gratitude builds up a psychological immune system as well as more resilience to stress, whether minor everyday hassles or major personal upheavals."

Among many researchers, Robert Emmons, a psychology professor at UC Davis, said, "not only will a grateful attitude help—it is essential." Emmons continues, "In the midst of hard times, gratitude energizes us. In the face of brokenness, gratitude heals us. In the face of despair, gratitude brings hope. In other words, gratitude can help us cope with hard times."¹ Although it may sometimes not be easy to feel grateful emotionally, we can still choose to be grateful, enduring and not being overwhelmed by temporary circumstances, and be relatively immune to the gains and losses that flow in and out of our lives." Emmons concludes, "My research says gratitude is worth the effort."²

Nowadays, it is no surprising news that gratitude is a 'must do' for a happier and healthier life. I sometimes experience the mystery of God's creation more deeply through the discoveries of scientists like psychologist Robert Emmons. Just like the apostle Paul, scientists encourage us to cultivate gratitude as much as possible. What a wonderful divine gift it is!

Thanks-giving is a day not only for enjoying a family reunion but also for remembering the One who always walks with us, cares for us, and heals us. Thanksgiving Day is a gift that allows us to pause, draw closer to God in prayers, and give thanks. Thanks-giving day reminds us that every day and every moment of our faith journey is a holy and blessed time to give thanks to God. I don't know who said this, but I firmly believe, "Happiness comes through the door of gratitude and slips out through the door of complaint."

Beloved siblings in Christ, we are people whose security is grounded in God and God alone. Gratitude is the sign that this conviction is deeply embedded in all

¹ Robert Emmons, *How Gratitude Can Help You Through Hard Times* (UC Berkeley. Greater Good Science Center)

² Ibid.

aspects of our life. I will conclude today's sermon with Paul's RPG version in Philippians:

R: Rejoice in the Lord always.

P: Pray instead of being anxious.

G: Give thanks to God, and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

This is Paul's invitation for us to live the chapter V life together in God. Can we, shall we dwell on this loving and blessed invitation? And all the people of God say, Amen!