

Paul loves this church, as you can tell by the tone of his greetings, and he thanks God for it. Even though he is probably writing from prison, he chooses to give thanks rather than give in to depression and despair, reminding us that gratitude and thanksgiving are choices we make. That is why I have always urged us to start our daily devotions with gratitude. When we choose gratitude, our lives are changed.

Listen:

Philippians 1:1-11

¹ Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³ I thank my God for every remembrance of you, ⁴ always in every one of my prayers for all of you, praying with joy ⁵ for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ I am confident that the one who began good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷ It is right for me to think this way about all of you because I hold you in my heart, for all of you are my partners in God's grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the tender affection of Christ Jesus. ⁹ And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰ to help you to determine what matters, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹ having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Thanksgiving is just around the corner, that's hard to believe, and then Christmas; we are moving into the season of rush, rush, rush. Lots of good things are coming, but it will be jam-packed. So, let's catch our breath and prepare ourselves for the coming weeks by pausing to give thanks. As many of you know, I think in terms of music lyrics, especially classic rock, and Jimmy Buffett music. I wanted to share some more music with you that I find Thanksgiving-appropriate. I posted them on our Facebook Page.

The first *Life is Beautiful* by Scott Stow, with the line of gratitude: "And right then I know for sure, love is blind, and hearts are pure, with each new breath and glass half full I see again that life is beautiful."

The second is *Wonderful World* by Louis Armstrong, which you probably know. I added the Ramons' version in memory of Gretchen Randon, who loved the Ramones. Despite our lapses into worry and feeling overwhelmed, this time of year can help us rally. Let's give thanks for the beauty of our lives and the wonderful world we enjoy. The choice is ours, and where we place our focus matters. Let's focus on gratitude. On the door to my office are these words from today's Scripture:

³ I thank my God for every remembrance of you, ⁴ always in every one of my prayers for all of you, praying with joy ⁵ for your partnership in the gospel.

It reminds me of how much you mean to me and how wonderful it is to be here. Several winters ago, I was at the Florida Winter School of Religion. Martin Copenhaver, the author of *Jesus Is the Question: The 307 Questions Jesus Asked and the 3 He Answered*, spoke of leaving a church and moving to another very prestigious position. He said he told them how grateful he had been to serve there, what a wonderful group of people they were, and that they meant a lot to him. A wise congregation member told him, "I wish you had said that to us earlier." So, I decided to do this.

When I mentioned my gratitude for you when I returned, some people got confused and thought I was leaving and saying goodbye, but my point is exactly the opposite: We must not wait to say thank you and tell people how much they mean to us, as I mentioned in the Jimmy Buffett song last week: *Life Short Phone Now*. So, with no plans to leave, I want to thank you. And I love you—the spirit of which I find in another song.

Dan Fogelberg, in a song called *Leader of the Band*, puts it this way:

I thank you for the music and your stories of the road
I thank you for the freedom when it came my time to go
I thank you for the kindness and the times when you got tough
And Papa, I don't think I said I love you near enough

So, all these songs and their interplay with today's Scripture remind me that it is never too soon to say thank you and tell people you love them. Without being gruesome, life is unpredictable, and you never know when you will get the chance again. Most of

us have someone we would give almost anything to say just one more time: thank you, or I love you, or both. So today, tell someone how much they mean to you.

I have told you something like this before, but I want to repeat it. At my Compelling Preaching workshop, I told people about our church and said this is where I feel God was leading me to all my ministry. My twelve-year tenure here was amazing to many people who were just starting a ministry or had just moved to a new call. They needed help getting their heads around a twelve-year call. I think it is a testimony to the sacredness of the covenantal relationship that can exist between pastors and congregations.

It doesn't mean all has been sunshine, lollipops, and rainbow. You have been with me in moments of exultation and soul-searing pain. Along with God and my family, your love got me through the most painful moment of my life when my daughter died. During that time, your love and care surrounded me and my family and helped me stand when I couldn't stand on my own. I remember that, and for that, I am ever grateful.

On a different note, but in the same way, Miles, my grandson, said, "You can't retire; they are my family, too." Thank you for taking my family into your hearts.

In addition, your supportive, compassionate love helped my ministry blossom even in my old age in ways I never imagined. Thank you for being you, which has helped me be my best self, so much so that I was honored by our presbytery to be selected as moderator. I also chaired the council, the leadership team, and co-chaired the committee on ministry, two other significant positions in our regional church, our presbytery. Locally, you enabled me to lead the GOAC, our area church organization, and the Interfaith Community through the times of COVID and beyond. Our community is better for these two organizations, and a good part of that is due to your expression of support for ministry in the community.

But I am also thankful for all you do in our community as a church and as individuals. You touch the lives of so many people, and I thank you for your good work and generosity.

Our community is a better place for all you do as individuals and what we do as a church. I don't dare to try to list them all because I would leave some out, but I want to let you know how much I appreciate it and how proud I am.

I want to thank God for our staff. We are blessed with the best staff I can imagine. Everyone, Carol, Andrea, Rick, and Tom, are self-starters who get things done and make this place run smoothly. We could not do it without them. While all of you do so much in your own way, I want to give a special shout-out to Christine, our accompanist, and Teddy, who faithfully works with our broadcasts each week.

So, like Paul, I give thanks to and for a church I love.

I try to remind myself daily that Gratitude and Thanksgiving are not just feelings. They are choices we make each day. So, each day, we can start by giving thanks. I found this prayer by Diana Butler Bass in her book *Grateful, the Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*. (p. 199-200) She leads us in a prayer of choosing gratitude. God, there are days we do not feel grateful. When we are anxious or angry. When we are alone. When we do not understand what is happening in the world, or with our neighbors.

We struggle to feel grateful.

But this Thanksgiving, we choose gratitude. We choose to accept life as a gift from you from the unfolding work of all creation. We choose to be grateful for the earth from which our food comes; for the water that gives life; and for the air we all breathe.

We make the choice to see our ancestors, those who came before us and their stories, as a continuing gift of wisdom for us today. We choose to see our families and friends with new eyes, appreciating them for who they are, and be thankful for our homes, whether humble or grand. We will be grateful for our neighbors, no matter how they voted or how much we feel hurt by them. We choose to see the whole planet as our shared commons, the public stage of the future of humankind and creation.

God, this Thanksgiving, we do not give thanks. We choose it.

And we will make thanks with strong hands and courageous hearts. When we see your sacred generosity, we become aware that we live in an infinite circle of gratitude. That we are all guests at a hospitable table around which gifts are passed and received. We will not let anything opposed to love take over this table. Instead, we choose to see grace, free and unmerited love, the giftedness of life everywhere as the tender web of all creation. In this choosing and in the making, we will pass gratitude onto the world.

Thus, with you and with all those gathered here, we pledge to make thanks. And we ask you to strengthen in us this resolve. Here, now, and into the future. Around this table. Around the table of our nation. Around the table of the earth.

Amen and Amen.