

Psalm 116:1-16, 12-18 (TMB) ~ Philippians 4:2-7 (NRSV)  
*Extreme Gratitude*  
Thanksgiving Sunday ~ November 19, 2017

*Introduction to Scripture Lesson:*

We can be thankful to two women, Euodia and Syntyche. It was their dissension that apparently threatened to destabilize the church that Paul established in Philippi, in about the mid 50's. We can be thankful to them because it is likely that their conflict was the catalyst for this letter that Paul wrote and what has since become the book in our Bible that we call, Philippians. Keep in mind as you hear these words, that Paul wrote this letter while he was in prison, likely in Ephesus.

Sermon

23 to 16... Who knows what I'm talking about? Raise your hands? Who is feeling extreme gratitude about the Packer win over the Chicago Bears last Sunday? Having just moved to Wisconsin, I am still in the first stage of learning about your extreme enthusiasm for all things Packers. Not to shortchange Wisconsin Badger love, either. Going for a win tomorrow against Baylor, yes? And I thought nothing could rival the extreme loyalty to The Ohio State Buckeyes raging in our former home state, Ohio. The first year our eldest daughter Emily began attending college in California and flew home to Ohio for the holiday, she noticed a strange thing as she walked toward the designated gate for the final leg of her flight home: Crimson and grey ball caps, hoodies, T-shirts signaled the right gate for her departure. And so for the next four years, whether the airport was Denver, Detroit, Minneapolis, or Dallas, she never really needed to check the gate number as she got close. The Ohio State Buckeye fans did that for her. Now that I'm here in Packer territory I'm guessing the green and gold will be our clue whenever we are flying home!

There seems to be nothing half-way about Packer fans. Or Wisconsin Badger fans. Or, switching sports for a moment, hunting fans! What an education I am getting: the start of the hunting season inspires parades, the PEO Holiday Boutique, a special "Hunter's Mass" at the Catholic church near our home--and sleepless men of all ages, (for several nights prior, so I'm told) packing and repacking their gear, their guns. *There's no doubt: We know how to be extreme about some things.* But what about gratitude? How extreme is our gratitude? And what does "Extreme Gratitude" look like?

It may look different than you think. Certainly it begins with being thankful for the *good* things God has given us. There are so many good things that we take for granted every day: the gift of life and breath itself, the beauty of the earth, the miracle of the human body, clean air, good water, plenty of food, a bed to sleep in, people who love and care for us, our land of the free and home of the brave. And there are so many, many more.... The practice of noticing our blessings, large and small, and thanking God specifically for them, brings us closer to God and actually expands our capacity for gratitude over time.

I can tell you this from my own experience of keeping a gratitude journal for the last 15 years. The concept is simple. Everyday you write down five things-- 5 specific things, thoughts, memories, experiences, for which you were thankful at some point during the day just gone by. Full disclosure here: some weeks I let 2, 3, even 5 days go by and then catch it up. But I can tell you, this practice has helped my faith to grow. The most important thing is to be honest and brief. You will be surprised by the little moments you might otherwise forget or dismiss. Hopefully this Thursday, on Thanksgiving Day, or whichever day you gather with friends and family for your holiday meal, consider taking a moment for each person to say a single word or a sentence naming something, they are feeling grateful for. That would be a simple and meaningful thing to do. A good step on the path toward "Extreme Gratitude."

However, if as Christians, our gratitude horizon ends there we are only half way toward *gospel gratitude*, or as I'm calling it "Extreme Gratitude." If we are grateful only for the good things and then just try to forget, ignore, or accept the bad things, we are cutting short the block and tackle of the gospel gratitude to which God is calling us. It is only this Extreme Gratitude that can grow us into the persons and into the world God yearns for us to become. As Meister Eckhart (German theologian, philosopher, and mystic of the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> century) wrote, "There are plenty to follow our Lord halfway, but not the other half." Extreme gratitude will help move us down the field, past the half-way mark.

At first glance, the "be grateful for the good, try to ignore the bad" approach may seem like a Christian one. And I will confess, this is my "go to" default mode. But I'm also learning to face the truth that if the arc of my gratitude stops there; I remain among those whom Meister Eckhart's describes as following the Lord only halfway. To be honest, I seem to be hard-wired to "look on the bright side." Ask my husband or daughters, or anyone who has ever camped with me. From the age of three, I began hiking with my three older siblings and parents, eager to keep up with, and out-do everyone with my "can-do" Brubaker attitude. Early on, we were taught the first rule of camping is not to complain, and to choose to look on the bright side.

I learned that lesson so very well, that about twenty-three years later, when my husband Bob and I, were on a cross-country bicycle tour in the state of Oregon, I surprised and annoyed him with my less than helpful retort in the middle of a very rainy night. We had chosen our tent site unwisely. And the rain poured and poured both on and into our little backpack tent. Bob wakes up in the middle of the night horrified to discover that half of our sleeping bag had become, not just damp, but totally soaked with rain. Of course, I'm still sound asleep, so he wakes me up and says, "Honey, honey look, our sleeping bag is soaked! We've got to do something!" To which I famously replied, "Just go to the dry part of the sleeping bag" and went back to sleep.

Yes, expanding the practice of gratitude over to the wet side, the dark side, the scary side, is hard for me. But I don't think I am alone here. Henri Nouwen (renowned Dutch Catholic priest, author, and spiritual mentor of mine) wrote about his own struggle with this aspect of gratitude saying, "It is hard precisely because it challenges me to face the painful moments—experiences of rejection and abandonment, feelings of loss and failure—and gradually to

discover in them the pruning hands of God purifying my heart for deeper love, stronger hope, and broader faith... Pruning means cutting, reshaping, removing what diminishes vitality.<sup>i</sup> As Jesus said, according to John 12:24, "Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

This is the part I hear God calling us to work on here today--here in the season of harvest and the beginning of winter. This is the other half of "Extreme Gratitude." Jesus was all about the wet side, the dark side, and the scary side. He experienced it during his days on this earth; and he is there with us, still. He modeled this aspect of gratitude at the last supper, knowing he was about to die, his heart likely breaking with grief over what he was facing and the last earthly meal he would enjoy with his best friends, when we are told, "Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks, he gave it to them." (Mark 14:23a).

You and I know that there is nothing halfway about our awesome God. Yes, our God who became flesh in the form of a particular man named, Jesus, to show us the way, the truth and the life. Talk about extreme. The stuff that Jesus said and did was so extreme he didn't last long on this earth. Jesus blazed with a love so powerful, any one who came into contact with him did not go away unchanged. Jesus' love pushed the boundaries and the limits of just what God's love could really do. Jesus showed us a kind of love that never made a detour or looked away when things got bad. A love that embraces our tears, our pain, our mistakes, our dead-ends with compassion. If you are hurting today, you came to the right place. Here in this place, we share our pain. We are not afraid to ask, "Where does it hurt?"

If you are out of work, out of time, out of money, out of patience, out of ideas, or just out of sorts, you came to the right place. Take a look at what's carved into the wall behind our communion table. That's right. It's not a yellow smiley face. Our doxology is not, "Don't worry...be happy." No. What do we see there? A cross. Even though we know in our heads that the cross is the main symbol of our faith, we may forget its extreme challenge. The cross doesn't tell us to go around and pretend we don't hurt. The cross doesn't tell us to avoid the mess we've made of our lives. The cross doesn't tell us to just keep running and running so we don't really have to think or feel about any one thing for very long. The cross does not tell us if we follow Christ all our problems will go away, and we will be happier and richer and thinner and more popular. If that's what you were looking for, you came to the wrong place.

The cross invites, beckons us, and points to hope in the midst of our hurt; the cross shows us how to face death, knowing that in the end, love will be victorious. The cross, the empty cross, calls us out of whatever tomb may be binding us today. Whether it's the tomb of regret or the tomb of resentment. Or maybe the tomb of old wounds we'd rather keep licking than give them to God to hold and to heal. The cross frees us to unbind ourselves and walk into the light of full court "Extreme Gratitude." The kind of gratitude where we learn that *every* moment of our life can be claimed as the way of the cross that leads to healing, to reframing, to new life.

Did you ever notice how there's nothing halfway about the Apostle Paul? Our Philippians text is a prime example. Paul pulls no punches with Euodia and Syntyche, leaders of the church in Philippi, who are having some kind of conflict. He addresses it head on. Treating them with equal respect, not taking sides but calling them to dig deeper and find their unity in Christ underneath their differences. And then he launches into this crazy line: Rejoice, always. Again I say rejoice. Have no anxiety about anything? What kind of world is he living in?

We happen to know Paul was writing from a jail cell. Paul, whose work was under attack by competitors. Paul, who had been working for about 20 years when he wrote this and continually suffered all kinds of physical and mental duress. Paul's joy, jumping off the pages of this letter, comes out of the darkness, the pain, the trials that his extreme faith and extreme gratitude have borne.

There is nothing halfway about Jesus' life on this earth or Paul's faith in Christ or the faith of the Psalmist in Psalm 116, which we call a Psalm of Thanksgiving. Did you hear him spell out to God the absolute darkness, despair, pit of terror he had been through? Instead of licking his wounds, or pretending they are not there, he opens them in detail before God. Read the whole Psalm to get the full effect. That psalm models what a prayer of "Extreme Gratitude" looks like. It's honest, raw and going for broke: consistent with the path toward divine healing we find throughout the Bible. Both scriptures, the lives of Paul and Jesus all reveal the contours of this spiritual practice I'm calling "Extreme Gratitude."

I will end this sermon by bringing us back to the table, this time the Thanksgiving table because the multi-layered story of how our national holiday called "Thanksgiving" came to be, can also serve to illustrate this dynamic of "Extreme Gratitude." The original story from 1621, by the English calendar, centers around a small band of white settlers who were saved from starvation by the significant help and cooperation from the Wampanoags. It was their meal together that we have come to call, "The First Thanksgiving." But it wasn't until 1789 when George Washington, our first President, actually proclaimed the day as Thanksgiving for all Americans, and that was to celebrate winning freedom from England in the American Revolution.

The third significant layering of this holiday came when President Lincoln in 1863 declared the last Thursday of November to be Thanksgiving day—hoping the holiday would bring a spirit of unity to a nation broken in two over the practice of slavery. The threat of starvation, the Revolutionary War and our Civil War: Those are the backstories behind the turkey, stuffing and pumpkin pie we look forward to this Thursday. Extreme stories, extreme gratitude from moments where we were on the edge of annihilation, not once but three times.

Meister Eckhart wrote, "There are plenty to follow our Lord halfway, but not the other half." What about us? How far are we willing to follow our Lord? What have we been holding back from God? That's where we need to start with our thanks. So sports fans, Packer fans, Badger fans, hunting fans (I suppose none of you are actually here today): How extreme is our

gratitude this year? Let us respond by singing together one stanza of the hymn, "God of the Sparrow" # 272. Let's pray and sing together:

*God of the rainbow*

*God of the cross*

*God of the empty grave*

*How does the creature say Grace*

*How does the creature say Thanks.*

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"All is Grace" p.40 by Henri J. M. Nouwen, in *Weavings*, Vol. VII, No. 6.

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