

“With Thanksgiving”

Introduction: We are entering what for many can be a highly anxious time of the year. Simply mention the phrase, “the holidays,” and watch people’s eyes glaze over! What else makes you anxious these days? Possibly you have health concerns. Maybe you’re wondering how you’re going to pay your bills. You might have relational challenges in your family. And certainly the horrific pictures of war that come across our screens each night add to our anxiety over just where this world is heading!

In our NT reading for this morning, we heard the apostle Paul declare: “Do not be anxious about anything...” Well, we might respond, that’s easy for you to say! In point of fact, it was not. Paul had much to be anxious about including the fact that he was writing the congregation in Philippi from prison, where he had been put for encouraging Christians to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Savior, not the crazed Roman emperor named Nero. Philippi was a Roman colony, and its citizens were expected to bow to the emperor, facing persecution if they did not. That would certainly be on my anxiety producing list!

So, in the midst of such anxiety, Paul calls this congregation to pray, but, notably, to pray in a particular way: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, *with thanksgiving*, present your requests to God.” Did you notice the little phrase, with thanksgiving? Our anxiety fighting prayer is not to just be a list of those things that are making us anxious but a reflection on what we are grateful for. We could say that Paul wants thanksgiving for us to be not just an annual holiday but also a daily habit.

I. Thankful People

A. This important component of prayer is not something Paul just came up with. Daniel is an interesting case study. Similar to the Philippians, Daniel, a man who had been exiled to Babylon, was instructed to worship the local ruler of his day, a king named Darius. Daniel refused, even though the alternative was being tossed into the lion’s den. In the face of this threat, and in the midst of what had to be anxious moments, we read the following:

Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, *giving thanks* to his God, just as he had done before. [Da. 6:10-11]

Evidently, thanksgiving had become a regular habit in Daniels life. The upshot was that, although Daniel’s circumstances didn’t change – he was indeed thrown into the lion’s den – he spent the night with the lions in perfect peace while it was the king who could not sleep and spent the night filled with anxiety (v. 18)!

B. Jesus, also, directs our hearts in this way as he was especially good at threading the difficult times in his life with thanksgiving. On one occasion he discovered he had a lot of hungry people on his hands and all he had to feed them with were five loaves of bread and two fish. He could’ve become anxious and complained that his Father shouldn’t expect him to feed several thousand hungry people with so little food! Instead, he noticed what he did have and then,

Taking the five loaves and two fish and looking up to heaven, he *gave thanks* and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples and the disciples gave them to the people. They all ate and were satisfied.

In these less than favorable circumstances, when he had but little, he gave thanks for what he did have and experienced God supplying all that was needed (Ma. 14:13-21).

C. On a more personal level, a few years ago my parents were burglarized. My dad's computer was stolen along with absolutely all of my mother's jewelry, including some very special pieces she had inherited from her mother and aunt. The only reason the thieves did not get away with more is that my dad returned home and, without knowing it, interrupted them – it seems that they snuck out of the apartment while he was in the kitchen. Thinking about this, and what could have happened to him had he actually bumped into the thieves, my mother gratefully remarked, "Well at least they didn't get my most precious jewel!"

II. Thanksgiving's Focus

A. What does giving thanks do for us? It helps us to notice. It often puts the anxious moments in our lives in a more helpful perspective as it helps to bring God back to the center of the stage. Remembering who we are and what we have, coming from the hand of God, from daily bread to forgiveness of sin, gives us cause, as Paul begins the paragraph, to rejoice in the Lord, to be gentle toward others, and to sense the Lord's presence. Ultimately, as Paul shares out of his own experience, it helps to bring us out of the pit of anxiety and into a sense of peace, one that "transcends all understanding."

B. Perhaps one way to begin this practice is, at the end of each day, look back over your day and thank God for at least one thing. Then talk with God about what that one thing meant for you.

Given that we will all be invited to think about our annual giving over the next couple of weeks, (and we don't want it to make you anxious!), I've asked three of you to help us approach this invitation with the practice of thanksgiving, filling out the statement: "I am thankful for FCCOE because . . ."