

**Sermon for Thanksgiving**  
**Prayer, praise and peace**  
**By Marilyn Zehr**  
**Philippians 4:1-9**  
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Gratitude is getting a lot of press these days. Of course it is. It's Thanksgiving weekend, a time when we remember to be grateful. Most news media appropriately devote key articles and human interest stories to the role and importance of gratitude in our lives on this Canadian Holiday long weekend, where we traditionally pause to give thanks for the fruits of the earth, among other things.

One of the articles that I read this weekend (The Toronto Star, October 11) gives us a fascinating look at how gratitude has been scientifically proven to have long lasting positive health benefits.

The article begins by telling a story about a teacher who gets his students to write in a gratitude journal every morning. This teacher notes that in one month there has already been a change. The children are more attentive in class, more interested in learning and generally seem happier coming to school.

For scientists who actually study the practice of gratitude "feeling positive" is just one upside of gratitude.

Apparently being explicitly grateful has social, physical and psychological benefits.

"Among other things, it increases happiness, improves sleep, strengthens relationships and reduces anxiety and depression. And it's been shown to boost the immune system, lower blood pressure, improve recovery from illness and even encourage people to exercise more." One of the scientist's quoted in the article says that if you can make "gratitude a daily practice, it's transformative." Reading this made me think of a living positively facebook challenge that made the rounds recently. For at least five days in a row you are supposed to list at least three things that you're grateful for. Anecdotally, people experience the benefits of gratitude in only a few days.

None of this is new, of course. We've known for a long time that being grateful was good and right and healthy, but as I read this article and others, it seemed that one thing was missing in this discussion and description.

Where is all this gratitude directed? To whom is everyone being grateful? One study that was done gets close to answering this question. Participants

were asked to write letters of gratitude and hand delivered them. The feel good benefits of this exercise, according to the study, lasted for at least a month.

Write a letter and hand deliver it? How many of us have done that in a while? From Canada Post to email, twitter and facebook, other mediums have taken care of delivering our written communication for a long time now.

This is actually the perfect bridge to our scripture for today. Philippians 4:1-9 is a hand written, hand-delivered letter from Paul by his co-worker Epaphroditus. At the time of writing the letter Paul is in prison in Rome and Epaphroditus who had come to see him with a gift from the Philippians became gravely ill and nearly died. Naturally this had greatly distressed the Philippians when they heard it. So now Paul sends him back to the Philippians with this letter in hand.

The letter begins as Paul's letters often do with profuse thanksgiving for the people at Philippi. Paul expresses his love for them and the joy he feels when he thinks of them and their on-going participation in the ministry of the gospel. One can sense this joy and gratitude throughout the letter. Even though Paul is suffering so much that he is not sure whether it is better to live and continue to be fruitful or to depart and be with Christ, even in the midst of this anguish, he experiences joy as he prays his thanksgiving for them to God. Chapter 4, our text for today, is his final exhortation that they too should. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." There's no ambiguity here about where the thanksgiving should be directed.

"But in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." And then, this next line is also important. For those of you who are intimately familiar with these verses try for a moment if you can to hear it as if for the first time.

When you have released yourself from worry, or at least tried to and when you have made your requests to God with thanksgiving then, the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Prayer with praise and thanksgiving directed to God will usher one into the peace of God that will keep one in union with Christ Jesus.

Is this the same kind of peace that our contemporary scientists are pointing to when they tell us about all the health benefits we receive when we practice the art of gratitude?

I'm confident that what Paul is referring to here is in fact much richer and deeper and maybe even less predictable. There's definitely more I want to say about this, but let me back up for just a moment and point to something that shows up in the verses we just read and even more clearly in the next couple of verses.

Paul was a contemporary of Stoic philosophy. Stoic philosophy, while I'm not an expert, espoused that the blank state of your mind received knowledge through sensory perceptions and so a wise person would focus on good and positive things so that these good things in turn produced virtuous action or moral excellence. Paul uses the commonly understood Greek term for moral excellence, *arête*, here and only here in all of his writing.

So in these next verses when Paul says "if there is any excellence or "*arête*" he knows he is using a commonly understood word for something that produces virtuous behaviour.

Listen again to these verses with that in mind.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence (*arête*) if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. So, philosophical science then and psychology now would concur that thinking about things that are true, pure, honourable and just were morally and otherwise beneficial. But then he goes on to say. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Earlier it said, "and the peace of God which surpasses all understanding," and here it says, "and the God of peace will be with you."

Prayer and praise lead to peace, not just any peace but the peace of God that will keep you in union with Christ Jesus and the God of peace who will be with you.

And now I want to address the question – so then what difference does it make?

If gratitude can be so beneficial in and of itself, and this was already understood by Stoic philosophy 2000 years ago and is currently measurable by the scientists of positive psychology, what difference does it make when our prayers of gratitude and praise are directed to God and not just out into the ether or to another person or even nowhere really just a feeling we have.

Think again about the hand delivered letter.

Prayer and praise and thanksgiving directed towards God are like hand delivered letters to the Divine. Gratitude to God doesn't just transform me because of the positive feelings it creates in me, although that might be possible to some degree, but gratitude directed to God puts me in touch, literally, with the source of my life. Gratitude as prayer directed to God puts me in touch with the giver of all things and that has the potential to be transformative in a whole new way on a completely different level.

Let me tell you a couple of stories that illustrate the point I'm trying to make.

I share one of the stories from Mary Jo Leddy's book entitled, *Radical Gratitude*.

"I had known the outline of the story of Dorothy Day, the foundress of the radical Catholic Worker movement, for some time. However, although I knew the course of the events of her life, I couldn't quite make inner sense of it.

I knew the published facts: A radical activist with little or no interest in religion, she had been arrested for her solidarity with the poor. Escaping to Long Island for awhile, she met a man called Forster, who, while embracing the world of nature, had rejected God. Together they conceived a child, much to Dorothy's surprise and delight. Because of a previous abortion, she had thought she was incapable of bearing children.

Once their daughter was born, Dorothy insisted on having her baptized and began going to church. Forster left and Dorothy became a Catholic, returning to New York City where she began a house of hospitality, the first of the Catholic Worker houses. Later, Catholic workers would wonder why she would go to Mass every day even as she protested against injustices in society and wrote about the weaknesses of the church.

But why, I wondered, was the birth of the daughter the cause of both the separation from her partner and her new commitment to the church?

The pieces of her story came together for me when I read a more detailed description of the time of her daughter's birth. She was so overwhelmed with gratitude that she needed to find a way to express it. "To whom should

I give thanks for so much joy?” Astonished by life, she discovered gratitude as the heart of faith and the Eucharist (which means the great Thanksgiving) as its most complete expression.”

As Dorothy Day’s life found daily opportunity for gratitude to God, God responded by continuing to transform her. The Catholic worker houses and more were the fruit of that transformation.

And the second story that I have to share with you is a parable from the Desert Fathers tradition:

A disciple once came to Abba Joseph, saying, “Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule, my little fast, and my little prayer. And according as I am able, I strive to cleanse my mind of all evil thoughts and my heart of all evil intents. (sounds a bit like he’s trying to follow the verse in Philippians about keeping his mind on good and noble and honourable things) Now, what more should I do?” Abba Joseph rose up and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He answered, “ Why not be totally changed into fire?”

You see there’s nothing wrong with keeping our little rule of spiritual disciplines whatever they may be. There may be many of you who already know the spiritual discipline of keeping a gratitude journal. These things are good and right and healthy, but if we dare allow ourselves to let God’s hand touch ours when we hand deliver our letter of prayer to God we may find that the transformation we experience surpasses our ability to understand it. In that place we might experience anything on a continuum from peace to fire.

Prayer in this way is an intentional opening up of oneself to communication and/or communion with God or the Divine. Prayer involves both speech and listening. In my experience, learning a language of prayer and growing spiritually as a fruit of that prayer are part of a life-long journey.

Before I leave our topic for today, I want to say a little bit about the opportunities that we at TUMC have to keep our little rule of prayer. These are the opportunities we have to write our letters of gratitude and hand deliver them to God in prayer.

First, each week during worship we pray to God and for each other when we share our Joys and Concerns. This sharing can be formative and

transformative for all of us as we share how we have experienced God at work and where we would long for God to be at work.

The first Sunday evening of every month, we have a service of prayer and worship known as Taize that consists of meditative song chants and silence. For those who participate this can truly be a precious experience.

There is a prayer chain among our members that we tap into when there is a crisis and there are the prayer requests that we post as part of our regular electronic communication. In this way we intercede for each other.

During Lent a few times in the past some have participated in Lenten guided prayer – where groups of three or four persons pray with the weekly scripture passages and then get together to share with each other their experiences in prayer.

Regularly Wednesday and Friday morning at 8 am two or three of us pray here at church. We make a little circle here at the front of the sanctuary and pray with an Anabaptist prayer book entitled, *Take our Moments and our days*. Some of you may also use this resource at home. Our little group is open to any and all persons who would like to join us. Please consider this an invitation. Or maybe some of you who don't live close to the church would like to gather weekly with one or two others in your own neighbourhood. I recommend this resource to you.

And today there is the gift Michele has supplied for us - a small book of Table Graces. One of the things that I noted about many of these prayers is that we pray not only in gratitude for the food, but also pray for the grace to be transformed, equipped and empowered by the sustenance we have received at the table in order to give of what we have received to others.

And now one last word before I conclude about what opportunities for prayer are and what they are not. Prayer and praise have the potential to transform our minds and hearts and to give us deep peace. But we are not actually in charge of heart transformation. Not our own and certainly not anyone else's. We can desire heart transformation and we can seek it. Habits of gratitude and prayer are excellent ways to seek heart and mind transformation. But the truth is we do not make transformation happen. God does. Only God can know us fully and only God has the power to sanctify and purify our hearts, our minds and our entire lives. As we hand our letters of prayer and thanksgiving to God, may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Amen

