November 15, 2026 *Marion* Weekly Update

Sermon "Gratitude" 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, Acts 16:19-29

As we enter this season of Thanksgiving it's wise to take a moment and reflect on the center of the holiday, gratitude. Sometimes we wait until the Sunday right up to the holiday before we take this moment so it's fresh for that week. Other times framing up the entire season is also a good idea because it prepares us, almost like an Advent season. It takes it from a singular day of celebration to several weeks of allowing the meaning to enter our hearts and deepen. The hope is that it makes the celebration all the more meaningful.

The term gratitude is tossed around quite a bit. I think most people would say that being grateful is part of a healthy, faithful life. Yet it's not as easy as it sounds. Scripture tells us in Thessalonians to "give thanks in all things". Rolls off the tongue nicely. Yet let's take a moment to recognize the reality of life.

Gratitude is most often accessible when there is balance in our lives between things going well and things that are not. The reason is that there is a clear difference in front of us between what we have and what we need. Sometimes we feel the need more because there's a contrast to it. So when someone or something steps in to meet that need we notice it more. And that feeling of gratitude wells up inside of us.

When everything is falling apart, it's easier to slide into despair. It's easy to stay focused on the negative because it's so present in front of us all the time. The walls feel like they are closing in. This is where we find those dark places where someone might ask us to think about why we're thankful and we say things like "what's there to be thankful for?!" "Everything's terrible!" We can actually be resistant to gratitude if bitterness and resentment take hold in us. Those seasons are even darker when we can't see an ounce of good around us.

That said, in those moments at least there is clear need. If the need is met gratitude might raise its head. What might be even more difficult is when everything is going wonderfully right.

In those seasons if someone asked us what we're thankful for we might be able to give a long list. But that's when we're asked. Day to day we might take most everything for granted. Things going smoothly can be so smooth we don't even notice what makes them that way. We don't think about all the good because it's not really contrasted with any significant need or want. In those seasons we can lose gratitude because of how easy life seems.

Gratitude doesn't necessarily come naturally depending on our circumstances. Which means it has to be intentional. It's a discipline.

This hit me about two weeks ago in the doorway between the bathroom and bedroom in the parsonage. I'd just pulled some clothes out of the dryer. The washer/dryer are in the bathroom right by that door.

It dawned on my like a ton of bricks and I started talking to Em about how many things within five feet of me I have to be thankful for and take for granted all the time. I listed off: hot water for the shower I'd just taken, having indoor plumbing, running water, a home to have the shower in, a machine that with the touch of a button washes my clothes for me rather than

having to take them down to a polluted river, right next to that machine another one that quickly dries those clothes for me, that I even HAVE a dresser for those clean clothes and that dresser is two steps from those machines, that I have electricity to run those machines and the machine that heats the water, and that there are even more than those that I could name just in view of that spot where I was standing.

You know what statement triggered the light bulb going on? It's rather stupid really. I had gleefully said to Em "I get to start my day with warm undies".

Give thanks in all things. Good, bad, or in between.

We see this all throughout Paul's ministry. This story of Paul in Acts is one of many where he was jailed, on the run, or beaten. Yet somehow through all of it he seems to maintain some kind of spirit of contentment and joy. Even when the world is screaming for his head.

In this story he's cast out a spirit from a woman and that spirit enabled her to perform feats that earned her master money. That master stirred things up with the people so much that even law enforcement got swept up and gave Paul and Silas a beating before throwing them in jail. What do they do in jail? They sing hymns!!!! And when an earthquake frees them what do they do? They stick around!

The jailer is ready to take his own life because he assumes the prisoners are all escaped and he knows he's done for anyway. It's Paul's voices that saves him, informing him that they haven't run. The end result is this man and his family come to faith.

The rest of the story is that the magistrates freed Paul and Silas because they were Roman citizens and had been mistreated and unfairly jailed. The officers were humiliated and had to escort Paul and Silas out at Paul's request. Perhaps part of Paul's confidence in staying in the jail was in trusting that even if the officers that beat them were in the wrong their superiors would uphold the law and make good on the situation.

But how does Paul keep his head in these moments? How can he stay joyful and content? I suggest it's because at his core he has cultivated a constant spirit and discipline of gratitude. He knows who he used to be and how far his faith has brought him. He knows that he has been redeemed by Jesus. He is aware of the transformation that has happened and continues to happen within him. This and this alone is enough for him to be inconceivably grateful. He has experienced the saving and transforming grace of God firsthand. Everything else comes in second place for Paul.

He's in jail? He's grateful for the opportunity to minister to the ones in jail with him. He's hanging out with well to do people? He's grateful for the food in his belly, place to sleep, and the opportunity to witness to the ones he's with. He's beaten for his testimony? He's grateful that he can experience something that helps him relate to his Redeemer.

This is the "do all things through Christ who strengthens me" sentiment. It's about contentment in all things. What is the key to having that? Gratitude. It's focusing on whatever bright spot or spots are there even in hard times. When we can catch even a glimpse of good and hang onto it with a spirit of thanks it changes our hearts and minds. It makes the hard easier to endure.

In the good times it makes them better because there is genuine appreciation on top of all the good. That connects us to the people around us that have been part of what life is good in those moments more deeply.

I think about folks I've talked with who are in a time and place where they can seemingly do very little other than hang out in bed. When they express gratitude for all those who are caring for their needs it's humbling. Because they haven't let bitterness creep in and rule their heart. Instead they find the good and the gratitude. Many of those people have said that in those times what they learned to appreciate is that the one thing they can do more than they've ever done before is pray. Not just for themselves but for their family, their friends, their community, whatever comes across the news, any and everything. Because they now have the time to do it. Again, that's humbling. Rather than resent their position they've found a way to see it through the lens of opportunity. That lens brings gratitude.

How much of our faith hinges on gratitude?

Humility- that comes from realizing we can't do it all ourselves. Gratitude recognizes this and brings us to a humbled state of mind and heart

Faithfulness and servanthood- responding to God's call and instruction is fueled by gratitude for what God has done and how God continues to work in our lives. If God is faithful how can we not be?

A giving spirit- gratitude for what has been given to us is the humbling force that inspires us to give to others

This just begins to touch the fullness of the benefit and necessity of having gratitude at the center of our hearts. It is the cure for corrosive entitlement, selfishness, and pride that causes so many problems in our world today.

It's so necessary, and like all necessary things requires tending in our lives. Think about what we say about just about anything worth having. It takes work. It takes intention.

This morning I encourage all of us to be intentional about our gratitude. Take time to notice all the good around us and then take a moment to appreciate it and give thanks. Give thanks to God, and to the people around us. I'm not saying you don't do this at all. I am saying that all of us can likely do it even better.

The more the gratitude grows the better our spirits, hearts, minds, and relationships are likely to become. The deeper our relationship with God is likely to grow. The more impactful our faith is likely to be. The brighter the light of Christ in us is going to shine.

In this regard I have some homework for all of us. As an aid you have an insert in your bulletin. It says "count them day by day". Take that with you and each day at the end of the day write down one thing you are thankful for. It can be big or small. Whatever it is make it intentional. Reflect on your day. Take note of what you have to be thankful for. Pick one. Write it down. That's intention. That's discipline. My hope is that doing this our gratitude and as a result our faith will grow a little each time. The more we embrace this sort of practice the more Thanksgiving becomes more than a single day. It becomes the practice of every day of our lives.

BIBLE STUDY Philemon

This book is unique in scripture. It is a personal letter. Not to a church. Not to a pastoral like Titus or Timothy. Just a personal letter asking for a favor. Yet in this simple letter there are some important things to keep in mind.

Philemon is clearly a friend and co-minister with Paul. He was located in Collosae. The letter notes that there is a church that meets in his home. Likely he was also instrumental as a Christian influence in that region. The letter spells out very wonderfully that Paul has great regard for Philemon. His own ministry has been supported by Philemon and he has taken great encouragement from him.

The content of the letter isn't about Philemon. It's about Onesimus who was a runaway slave of Philemon's. This communication is about asking that Onesimus be welcomed back not as a slave but as a Christian brother in the faith.

The beginning of the letter has great affection from Paul. It is genuine. There is no deception in Paul's affirmations. That said, there is likely a reason for such a complimentary greeting. In all we learn about Philemon, there is an agenda.

The "therefore" clues us in to this. When we see this word we know that we need to pay attention to what has come before because what comes after is closely tied to it. In this case Paul is asking that the runaway slave Onesimus be welcomed back without harsh consequence. Paul is reminding Philemon of his(Philemon's) own Christian quality so that this appeal for Onesimus might be considered more significantly.

Paul elevates Onesimus's value and character. Whatever he was before, he is now clearly a devoted Christian who has been invaluable to Paul in companionship and ministry. In fact he even intimates that Onesimus is comparable in value and quality to Philemon himself. There has been a converting experience and however Onesimus landed with Paul he has proven invaluable as a fellow believer.

We don't know why Onesimus ran away. That Paul offers to make restitution could mean that he had done something problematic. Perhaps thievery. Perhaps damaging something in the household. We don't know. It could just as possible be that Philemon was a harsh and cruel master. Again, we don't know. All we know is that he was a runaway.

By Roman law Philemon would have a great deal of latitude in how he punished/received Onesimus. The consequence could be severe.

Instead, Paul appeals to Philemon in regard to Christian love. He suggests that this be the guide. Receive Onesimus as if it were Paul himself. Grant him grace. Offering to make restitution on Onesimus' behalf likely wasn't expecting to be charged anything. Likely it was a sense of "just let bygones be bygones, welcome him, move forward and work together."

Over and over Paul reminds Philemon of his faith and good record of service and love. He also reminds Philemon of his own status(Paul's).

The letter starts out identifying himself as a prisoner, not apostle. This is personal. Paul doesn't need to assert his role. His circumstance is more personal. He is in jail because of his ministry. He also calls himself an "old man", indicating a seniority. He also reminds Philemon that whatever Onesimus might owe, Philemon himself owes Paul his very life.

At the same time Paul says that he doesn't want Philemon to make a decision based on authority. He has the freedom to choose himself how to deal with the runaway Onesimus.
The letter is an amazing example of personal relationship. We all know these connections. People we know deeply well. We've suffered and worked with. We've dived deep into one another's personalities, ambitions, and desires. We can get away with leveraging things that others can't. And they get to do the same with us.
Paul is reminding Philemon of his own role without lording it over him. He is reminding Philemon that he knows him and his heart. So that even if Philemon's own feeling, and even the law of the land, might push him to treat Onesimus harshly, Christ commands otherwise. Grace rules. Forgiveness rules. Family in faith rules.
Think about your own relationships. Someone who knows you well and a decision you're facing pushes you to what you know is right even though emotion and law give you indulgence for revenge. They are your conscience. To do otherwise would bring shame next time you talk or meet face to face. It's beautiful accountability out of love and friendship.
Paul doesn't need to give some doctrinal correction. They already have a personal understanding. Paul's appeal is to their relationship knowing the faith undergirds all of it. In the end Paul trusts that Philemon will forgive Onesimus and even welcome him as an equal and fellow minister of Christ.
Here is a debatable but thoughtworthy aspect of this letter.
Through the entirety of the Bible slavery isn't derided, condemned, or even spoken against. In fact even in the New Testament it is upheld as in "slaves obey your masters". This letter is a rare pushback.
The suggested "support" of slavery has a real explanation. It isn't the unreal, dishonest whitewashing that "slavery was different then". No it wasn't. It had the same dimensions it always has through history. There were slaves better treated and supported and those worse treated and diminished. Always. The reality is that they thought Christ was coming back relatively soon. Their mission was to spread the gospel as far and long as possible. To push back against established institutions like slavery would have been to them destructive beyond repair. Try to overthrow a social order and get destroyed. Then the gospel goes NOWHERE. The sense was to live into society and endure as much as didn't controvert the gospel. Why? For the greater effect of the gospel being heard and accepted by as wide an audience as could hear it.
In this personal communication between Paul and Philemon we see something different. There seems to be a subtle request to accept a runaway slave back as an equal.
It is the essence of "there is no slave nor free."
Paul is pushing back against the law of owning another human and placing another law above it. The law of Christ. We are all equal and for Philemon this is an instance in which he can enforce it. The law gives permissions, but as a master he has the final say. Paul wants him to make that final say that Onesimus is his brother, not his property. His equal, not his slave.
Take from that what you will. I suggest that Paul us putting his money to his mouth. He is asking Philemon to see a human as a human, not as a piece of property.

This is something we need to grasp onto more and more. Cultural permissions do not override Christian love. Cultural divisions do not override the call to unity.
Grace never surrenders to ignorance and hate. Why? Jesus tried to bring us together and that is passed on to every one of us who calls ourselves Christian.