



Be Grateful



A Sermon By
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September 24, 2017
Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

An audio version of this sermon may be found on the Grace Church website at
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/2017-09-24-AWW.mp3>.

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The Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost
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In our second reading, we heard a short passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians, and I want to build upon that by sharing another piece of the letter. This portion comes toward the end, beginning with the 10th verse of the 4th chapter. There, Paul writes to the Philippians:

I rejoice in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

I'm content. I'm okay. There's no need to worry, no need to fret. I'm not whining. I'm not complaining. I'm not grumbling. Jesus is here with me, and everything is all right. I feel good.

We can almost hear Paul singing:

*Now thank we all our God,
with heart and hands and voices,
who wondrous things has done,
in whom his world rejoices;*

Paul was writing in the mid-50's, about twenty-five years after Jesus' death. Paul was in prison at the time, which really wasn't unusual for him. As he travelled from town to town, and city to city, Paul's message about Jesus wasn't always welcome, and over the years, he had gotten himself into a lot of trouble. At one time or another, Paul had been beaten, arrested, run of town and thrown into jail, so he was accustomed to all of the shackles, the bars, the Roman guards, but even though prison was nothing new, this imprisonment was different, because Paul wasn't sure how it would turn out. He wasn't sure if he would see the Philippians again. He wasn't sure if he would be released. He wasn't sure if he would live through the ordeal, and he wasn't sure if that was necessarily bad.

Paul's life belonged to Jesus. All that mattered to Paul was preaching and teaching about Christ, travelling around the Mediterranean to start new Christ-centered communities. If the Romans were going to execute him for that, for living out his calling, for being who he was, then Paul was willing to accept it.

So, despite his dire circumstances, Paul's letter to the Philippians was full of joy and gratitude. Paul wasn't worried about the little nuisances and annoyances anymore. Paul was seeing life from a new perspective. He knew what it was to have little; and, he knew what it was to have plenty; and, he knew what was really important in life. No matter what happened at this point, Paul's heart was full, and he wanted to share that with his friends. He wanted them to know:

I'm content. I'm okay. There's no need to worry, no need to fret. I'm not whining. I'm not complaining. I'm not grumbling. Jesus is here with me, and everything is all right. I feel good.

We all need that perspective sometimes. We all need to remember the big picture, because we can get pretty caught up on life's hassles and headaches, all of those things that really get to us on occasion: the traffic, the Metro, school, work, paying the bills, children who don't listen, parents who won't let us do whatever we want, being too busy, not getting things done. We whine, and complain, and grumble about all of it.

A few days ago, I was coming out of church, when my cell phone slipped from my hand. I watched in slow motion as it tumbled through the air end-over-end, until it hit the concrete steps, bounced a few times, and then, and shattered into pieces. It took me two days to get a new phone, which is a story unto itself, but for those two days, it was like the apocalypse from Revelation – my whole world was coming to an end. And, I was angry, agitated and fussy... over a phone.

There are lots of reasons we get this way. Some people aren't happy unless they're worrying about something. Others like to complain as a way of getting attention. It's their way of saying, "Hey, look at me. Pay attention to me." And, grumbling can be a way of connecting with other people. If I grumble about not having my cell phone, suddenly, we all have something to talk about and a way for us to relate.

It's not surprising, then, that we see a lot of griping in the Bible. People were always whining to God, and complaining to God, and grumbling to God. In our first reading this morning, the people of Israel were complaining, even though God just led them out of Egypt, freeing them from slavery. In our Gospel story, it was the early workers who were grumbling, even though the landowner gave them a full day's work job and fair day's wage. And, I can't help but think of the elder brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. When his good-for-nothing younger brother finally returned home, to open arms and big, huge party, the elder brother was so bitter and jealous he went whining to his father, even though his father loved him more than anything in the world.

I guess can't help our selves sometimes - griping is just part of our human nature – but it's really no way to live. Our outlook on life is like any other habit: if we get used to thinking a certain way, after a while, we just naturally take on that perspective, so constantly complaining can foster a habitually negative attitude. Rather than appreciating what we have, we fret about what we don't have. Rather than enjoying the here and now, we worry about tomorrow. And, that kind of outlook gets in our way of relishing life and making the most of every moment. Nothing good comes from it. It won't make us happy. It won't make us feel better. It won't help us achieve our goals. Plus, it's draining, on everybody. There's really no good reason for us to get all worked up over the little things, especially since most of us, in the big picture, are pretty blessed.

During Adult Forum last Sunday, participants from the summer youth mission trip talked about their experiences working in Atlanta. Much of what they did was working with social service organizations, but they also had the opportunity to interact quite a bit with people living on the streets, people who had no home. One of the questions asked during the Forum was: "What was the most important lesson you learned on the mission trip?" And, the two answers that stuck with me were: One, people living on the streets are not much different than you and me; and two, be grateful for what you have.

All of us can choose to be grateful. Each and every day, we are faced with countless opportunities to practice being grateful. It's a deliberate choice we make and a spiritual discipline that nurtures our relationship with God, enabling us to see life from a new perspective. We can choose to be grateful for another beautiful day, when we're stuck in traffic or the Metro is running late. We can choose to be grateful for learning and growing, when we don't want to go to school or don't want to go to work. We can choose to grateful for things to occupy our day, when we're feeling completely stressed over everything we have to do. Rather than griping about the all the things that get under our skin, we can choose to be grateful instead, grateful for the moment, grateful to be alive, grateful that God is here with us. It's as simple as telling our selves:

I'm content. I'm okay. There's no need to worry, no need to fret. I'm not whining. I'm not complaining. I'm not grumbling. Jesus is here with me, and everything is all right. I feel good.

Amen.