

**Thanksgiving Eve Community Service Philippians 4: 4-9, November 27th, 2024,
Emmanuel Lutheran, Lancaster, PA, Rev. Timothy W. Sadler, Pastor**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Rejoice in the Lord always, Paul says. And then he says it again. “Well Paul”, we might ask, “how is this possible in the real world?” And Paul would reply, “because the Lord is near.”

Because the Lord is near, we’re able to rejoice. Not just when things are going our way, but all the time, because the Lord is near all the time. And when Christ is the source of our rejoicing, He’s also the source of our strength and peace.

Paul tells us we’re not to be anxious about anything, because there’s nothing on this earth that we can’t talk about to God. There’s nothing so bad, so despicable, so enraging, that we can’t take it to God. When we can live believing this, then God’s peace which goes far beyond anything we can imagine, will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

God’s peace will actually guard us—not just sit there and give us a warm, fuzzy feeling of “gee, this is a great life.” But will actually guard us so that even in times when this isn’t such a great life, God’s peace will still be there, deep within our hearts and minds.

What underlies all this—what makes it possible—is the capacity to live with a sense of gratitude. Without gratitude, we have an empty space within us that will probably be filled with discontentment or resentment. And living life in the negative—robs us of joy and energy.

I think our ability to live with gratitude depends a lot on how we see God at work in our lives. If we see a lot of negativities in our lives, we may believe God doesn’t care or isn’t powerful enough to change our circumstances.

If we feel life is unfair and we’re constantly being dumped on, it’ll be hard to believe in a God of compassion and grace. We may be able to see God’s grace at work in other people’s lives but when it comes to our own life, we’ll just feel we’re either unlucky or unloved.

But—if we know that God is compassion and always has our good at heart, then we may be able to see our lives differently. If we understand that this life has purpose, and we need to experience the negative as well as the positive so that we can learn and grow...

Deeper spiritually, then we’ll begin to seek the presence of God through every circumstance and every challenge, because we’ll trust that the presence of God is there.

I don’t know about you, but I seem to learn things the hard way. When I look back over my life, it has been precisely at those points of suffering and challenge that I have learned the most.

When I experienced my divorce, I was in my early 30’s. Although I wouldn’t want to repeat that experience, I have never regretted it because it was a major teaching moment in my

life. I needed that divorce to get me to address some pretty important issues in my life. So yes, I am grateful for having had that experience.

There is grace through everything on this earth. Whether we can see it or not, it is there. God's presence permeates all of life, because all of life comes from God. God's grace is never absent, even in the presence of evil, because not even the worst evil can overcome the light and love of God.

Tomorrow is Thanksgiving. I remember in school the teacher always had us make a list of the things we were thankful for. But in scripture lesson for today, you'll notice we're not called to give thanks only for the things we've received for the blessings we enjoy.

Rather, we are called to live with gratitude because of our relationship with God, the God who cares for us and walks with us, through both the good and bad times of our lives.

Without this relationship, nothing else would much matter anyway. It's belonging to God that gives our lives meaning and makes them count for something. It's belonging to God that enables us to live in hope now and look forward to that time when we will be Home with God, surrounded by loved ones and alive in God's grace and joy.

Thanksgiving is not about things: it's about living in the presence of God. It's about recognizing God's grace and compassion even in the midst of pain. It's about realizing we don't have to carry the burdens of this life all by ourselves.

We have a Lord we can look to and love. And that is the greatest blessing of all. And for that we give thanks to the God who has made it all possible, life without end.

AMEN.