

Sermon The Spiritual Life is... Thanks October 1, 2017

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends! I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through Christ who gives me strength. Philippians 4:1-13

Today is World Communion Sunday, when Christians all around the world gather at the Lord's Table, at His invitation, to remember and to be thankful for His love and sacrifice for us; to remember and be thankful that He welcomes us... and He welcomes all the world... to His Table. The Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Philippi about always being thankful. He wrote about being thankful to a church where there was arguing and division. He wrote this letter about being thankful from prison. Paul understood thankfulness as a spiritual practice... and really a practice that he was able to do because he knew - he experienced - the love and mercy and Presence of Jesus Christ, and he knew that nothing... not hardship or persecution, or peril or sword (from his letter to the Romans) he knew that nothing could separate himself from Christ's love.

And so in spite of anything that had happened, or could happen, Paul was able to practice thankfulness.

Thankfulness is a spiritual practice, which means that we can learn it, and teach it; we can model thanksgiving, and talk about it, as a Christian practice. Today, as we prepare to come to the Lord's Table, to share this extravagant meal of Christ's sacrificial love and mercy for us, His welcome and acceptance of each of us, I have an acronym to help us learn the spiritual practice of thankfulness.

I think it was Cookie Monster from Sesame Street who coined the expression "Nom-nom". It's the sound Cookie Monster makes when he's eating his favorite thing in the world (a cookie) "Nom-nom-nom-nom". We come to the Table this morning to receive these simple elements of bread and juice that are a tiny foretaste of heaven, and so this is no ordinary meal; it's a taste of boundless mercy and unending love. Maybe today instead of saying "Amen!" or "Thank You, Jesus!" we say "Nom-nom" like Cookie Monster when he's biting into a cookie.

Paul's advice to the church was to be thankful, always, in all things. I've been thinking about what Budd McKenzie said to me about how thankful the children are in Afghanistan for everything they receive. He compared it to the children in our communities who have too much, including too much pressure to succeed, and then thankfulness takes a backseat, or flies out the window, because our children can be overwhelmed with "too much". Paul wrote about being thankful in all circumstances from prison... he, like the Afghani children, found thankfulness in the midst of having little. At the end of his letter Paul tells the church that he's learned to be thankful even with little, because he has Jesus.

Here's my acronym for thankfulness... thankfulness we can taste, whatever the circumstances. Nom-nom thankfulness. Will you try it? The "N" in nom-nom is for nature. I wonder if Paul could see trees from his prison cell, or if he could smell the ocean, or if he looked at the night sky. Nature reveals God to us in such beautiful ways, and invites us to be thankful. I walked on the beach on Friday afternoon and I wanted to dance with joy to see and smell and feel God's ocean splashing on me. Everything God created brought God such delight that God said, "This is so good!" We are meant to see God's signature in nature, and experience God's delight in creation as a way to be thankful. One of the church fathers, St. Augustine said, "It is solved by walking" about walking in nature, and looking for God, and listening for God there. The psalms are a wonderful place to read about our spiritual ancestors experiencing God in nature. "The heavens reveal God's glory!" one of the psalmists wrote. Learn to practice thankfulness in nature for God's presence; learn to look for nature to reveal the glory of God. The "N" in "Nom-nom" thankfulness is for nature.

The "O" in nom-nom is for others. We experience God's love most profoundly through other people. It's very hard to be a Christian on your own... to practice love and forgiveness and joy and thankfulness by yourself. We were created to be in relationship, with God and with others. We need others to love and forgive and teach and remind us that regardless of any circumstances ~ we are, all of us, God's beloved. It's said in some 12-step meetings, "If you had a bad week, you need to be here [at the meeting] and if you had a good week, we need you to be here."

Jesus did not come just for you and me... He came to love and redeem all the world. He said two really important things about love: that the way we love others is a

witness that we are His followers, and that we are to love and pray for our enemies. What a radical thought that's practiced almost nowhere in the news or on the political stage: love and compassion for enemies. One of my friends has shared a thankfulness-prayer when he's discovered the differences and perhaps enmity between himself and other. He prays "Lord, bless them. Change me." I'm calling this a thankfulness-prayer because it's a means of putting ourselves right with Jesus when we pray for our enemies.... And as Paul testified, when we're *with* Jesus we have cause to be thankful... always.

Friends and fellow Christians are cause for thankfulness, but outsiders and enemies can also be cause for thankfulness... because fear and hate and exclusion can and should make us run to Jesus for comfort, for healing, and mercy. We come to His Table where He says, there are no enemies, and no divisions, only love. When we come to the Lord's Table, Paul told the churches, we need to be in right relationship, as much as possible, with all others. The "O" in the practice of nom-nom thankfulness is for others, for the love they show us and the lessons they teach us.

The "M" in nom-nom thankfulness is for movement, especially the movement of the Holy Spirit. Jesus told His followers that the Spirit is like the wind, and moves where it will. The Spirit is moving in us, always changing us, and refining us (with our cooperation... God doesn't force anything) shaping us into the likeness of Christ. The Spirit moves us to be reconciled with each other.... to see the image of God in all others. The Spirit sometimes sighs and weeps and groans in us, to be reconciled, to open our hearts and minds and spirits, to God. The Spirit nudges us and pokes us to notice that God is present... still in the world creating and delighting. The Spirit grieves

with us, and sits patiently with us, when we struggle and grieve. The Holy Spirit is active and moving in us... sometimes calling us to change old ideas, old opinions, even old theology, so that we can be present, here, now, and in all places... with Jesus. Paul said that he was able to be thankful in all circumstances... because of Jesus, because Paul experienced Jesus... His love and forgiveness, His redemption of Paul's old life, and His purpose for Paul's new life. The Holy Spirit moves us out of old ways of being and into new places, and it can be difficult and painful to be thankful in the letting go. It was doable for Paul with Jesus. The Spirit is moving in us... moving us to love, to forgive, to create, to be thankful. Every urge we feel to pray is the Spirit moving in us. The Spirit The "M" in nom-nom thankfulness is for the Holy Spirit's persistent movement in us.

When I was a little girl I asked my mother at bedtime for a happy thought, and she would give me something to think about, to focus on, to let go of the worries of the day, or the boogeyman under the bed. I was training my mind, away from fear and loneliness, to peace and contentment. Paul wrote to the church about training our minds in the practice of thankfulness. He wrote, "Whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you." Thankfulness is a Christian spiritual practice that we can learn and share with the world around us.

May nom-nom thankfulness - thankfulness we can taste and see and experience - be our response to God's goodness in our lives, and in the world. Amen.

