

Advent 02 C 2018
December 9, 2018 :: Luke 3:1-6
Fr. Jim Cook

“In Thanksgiving, and Prayer.”

Early last week, I thought I knew the general direction this sermon would take. That is, until Wednesday, at the 10:00 AM Eucharist in the Chapel. Because, there, one of the ladies-present drew my attention to a passage I had just read aloud, but had basically overlooked. It’s near the end of our reading from Philippians, and it’s this:

“And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best . . .” (vv 9-10a).

And the longer I thought about what Paul was writing here, the more certain I became about what I needed to say on this second Sunday in Advent.

Generally speaking, Paul’s letter to the Philippians has long been described as a love letter, and the verses we heard this morning make it clear why that’s the case.

Paul and those Christians in the city of Philippi have been enjoying a special kind of friendship; it's one in which each party holds the other in affection, in love, and in support.

Now, it was common, in the ancient world, for a letter to begin with a section of "words of thanksgiving." But this letter absolutely gushes with expressions of Paul's gratitude for their support.

However, what makes these verses even more important for us, is the fact that they provide us with a sort of primer on the nature of prayer, and they talk about two of the elements in prayer that deserve our attention.

The first element of prayer is thanksgiving, and Paul puts it right at the heart of his practice of prayer, because he thinks it's that important, that powerful. And so, Paul begins his letter with this simple, but profound, statement: "I thank my God every time I remember you."

Now, try to imagine what it would be like if we began the letters that we write like that. Or if we began our conversations with people like that. And think of the impact it could have if.

For example, what do you think would happen if, the next time you had a significant conversation with a friend, that you began that conversation by telling them that, every time you think of them, you say a word of thanks to God for their friendship and support?

Or, what do you think would happen if, at the next important meeting you had at work, that you began by telling the whole group how you are grateful to God to be working with them?

Or, the next time you sat down with your family, that you turned to each person and said what you are grateful for to God about each of them?

Wouldn't that change things? Yes! Can you see how expressions of thanksgiving could be really powerful things? Because they build up the other person. They name what is beautiful and wonderful about them. And they link all those good things that you're pointing out . . . to God, the giver of all good things. And truth be told, all of us could probably do with a bit more thanksgiving in our lives.

And so, Paul gives thanks for the Philippians. However, and because he values them, he also *prays* for their well-being, praying:

“that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best.”

You know, people often think of prayer as an individual matter, where we give God’s thanks for the good things we’ve received, or we ask God to attend to our needs. But prayer can also be a deeply communal practice, because don’t we also care about the welfare of those around us? And especially those we know and love? In fact, such a love might be described as a commitment to seek unflinchingly the good of another. And that’s what Paul prays for. But this is something we can practice, too.

One preacher described how he had been encouraged to pray for his children — who were, at that time, still in elementary school — praying that they might one day find a loving and supportive spouse. And he thought about how wonderful a practice that could be: to commit to years of praying for the welfare of one’s children.

But I'm also reminded of a particular member of my parish back in Kansas. I don't know if they *intended* to make my life miserable, or if that was something that just came naturally for them, but we had a tense relationship for a long time. Until, that is, I began to pray for them. Every time that person came to mind, for *whatever* reason, and I began to feel my stomach starting to roil, I would pray to God for their well-being. Honestly, I don't think it changed them all that much, but it change me, and I was finally able to play a pastoral role in their life.

And so, and thinking back to our reading from Philippians, what Paul recommends that we do in our lives, he shows us through the example of his life; by giving thanks to God for those Philippians, and by seeking after, and praying for, the welfare of those people with whom he longed to be reunited.

However, and as I alluded to a moment ago, there is a benefit in all this for us as well. Because as we offer our expressions of gratitude and love, our attention is drawn away from ourselves — from who and where we are, and from what, in that moment, we may or may not have — and for a while our attention is focused instead on our gratitude for someone else, and on the needs of someone else. And that can often be a good thing.

In the end, I believe that the ongoing practice of thanksgiving and prayer, can have the long-lasting effect of our feeling more confident, of our feeling more at peace, and of leaving us with a greater sense of well-being . . . with ourselves, with those around us, but especially with God.

Let us pray: Dear God, we thank you for all the people you have placed in our lives; we do pray for their welfare, and we do entrust their strengths and needs to your love. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.