

“The Power of a Preposition”

Philippians 4:4-8

November 21, 2010

Lin Grace Rohr

It would be “easier” and maybe preferred by some to focus on Thanksgiving Sunday in this way. [Show and name Norman Rockwell’s; Freedom from Want Picture]. This picture has long inspired American families and others. The family is gathered around the table giving thanks **for** the traditional Thanksgiving feast. The context of this familiar picture by Norman Rockwell is often forgotten. It was one of Rockwell’s four freedom paintings that appeared on the cover of the Saturday Evening Post in the middle of World War II. The family gathered to give thanks **for** the feast was **in** the midst of global conflict and crisis. This Thursday, on Thanksgiving, most of us will gather with family and friends to give thanks **for** our feast, **for** our families and **for** our friends...but obviously we, too, are **in** a larger context.

Let’s look at some headlines of our global context on this Thanksgiving Sunday. [Show slide of headlines]. As I read them please note they are from last Thursday. [Irish Debt Crisis Tests European Union’s Firefighting Skills; Indonesia Volcano Death Toll Tops 200; 42 Killed, 90 Injured In China Fire; Obama’s Hopes For Russian Nuclear Pact Crushed; Cholera Outbreak Spreads in Haiti and Beyond; Israeli Settlement Freeze Plan Hits Snag]. Not to be insensitive to these and all the other things happening around the world, but here at Covenant in a much smaller context we are experiencing a challenging time, that as your pastor for a couple more weeks, I would like to address.

The Apostle Paul addresses both, the larger and smaller contexts, with his wise words to the Philippians. To the Philippians, Paul said, “Do not worry about anything, but **in** everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” [Philippians 4:6]. That tiny two letter word, that powerful preposition “**in**,” guides us and graces us on how to live in challenging times. The power of the preposition to inform and inspire us is subtle but essential to Paul’s message. We do not give thanks **for** everything we are to give thanks **in** everything! [New Slide: We give thanks in all things]

Last week, in the announcement of my intention to resign, you had a range of emotions in response; some were surprised, some were angry, and some were hurt. From what you’ve told me not many are thanking God **for** it, but I am here this morning to encourage all of us to thank God **in** it, and let me tell you why using Paul’s words. “Do not worry about anything, but **in** everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” “Do not worry about anything...” Some might argue with Paul, “How can we not worry? Change is hard! Presbyterians are prime practitioners of worry.” It may be tempting, for you and for me, in our own separate ways to review what happened, analyze it, and then move on. Applying a corporate model of business to a church community and Christian relationships; but, Paul guides us differently, he says, **do not worry...but in everything, in** these hard times of change and challenge, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

The response to worry...is prayer; not a review of an incomplete to do list, not a Christmas list of wants to “a Santa Claus in the sky,” but prayer. And in this case, I believe a specific kind of prayer; what people of faith since Ignatius in the first century have called a prayer of “examen.” I know, to some, this may seem more scary than worrying, but in confidence of God’s love, self-examination as individuals and as a community of faith, do not lead to condemnation but rather healing and wholeness! In humility, when we can confront the truths about ourselves, trusting God, then and only then, can we truly be the individuals and communities that God is calling us to be. In our Christian tradition there are two forms of the prayer of examen: “first, ‘examination of conscience,’ which is an explicitly penitential practice that helps us name and acknowledge our own weaknesses, shortcomings, and if necessary, although we may not like it, sins; and the second, ‘examination of consciousness’ which sharpens the awareness of both positive and negative aspects of our attitudes and behaviors.”¹

My friends, my brothers and sisters in Christ, this is hard, really hard...but its real, it’s the authentic living of faith. It’s how we can experience “real grace” not “cheap grace” as Bonhoeffer said. Separately, in the weeks and maybe even months ahead, we will struggle, as we wrestle with what happened, and how it came to be that we are no longer being called to worship and serve God together, as pastor and community of faith. We may wrestle to see the mysterious new thing God is doing, but through that struggle, we will be strengthened in our life of faith. I am reminded of the Biblical story of Jacob. Jacob who wrestled with the angel when the angel said to him, “let me go,” Jacob replied, “I will not let you go until you bless me.” Then Jacob, the man who stole his brother’s birthright, the man who deceived his father-in-law out of some of his flock...the man of God who faced who he was and wrestled with God was blessed by God and God transformed him from the “Supplanter” to “Israel,” the one who strives with God. And as we all know this “Israel” is the one who is the father of the Israelites...the nation of Israel today, who today in many ways continues to strive with God as we were reminded even in our headlines from this last week. Like Jacob, you, as a community of faith, and I as an individual, each in our own ways may need to say to God, “We will not let you go, we will not stop wrestling with you, until you bless us!” And God will bless us and transform us from who we are into who we are to be!

From this kind of deep, wrestling prayer, Paul tells us, we can move to supplication...honest asking! I know many of you have questions about my decision to leave. Let me assure you, it’s not from lack of love for you...and I will say that again and again. It’s not because of my health, my health is fine. It’s not because a couple of people left after the former co-pastor left eighteen months ago; pastors and churches know that is just a part of church life. I’ve heard the rumor that it’s because someone isn’t pledging to the operating budget. Let me assure you I don’t know who pledges or not. I know Covenant had 321 pledging families last year, but I don’t know who they are or how much they pledged. And while we’re on that point, I encourage you in your prayerful examen to consider how you are to pledge this year. Like I said last week, we commit not to a pastor but to God’s ministry and mission through a place. My decision to leave Covenant, this incredible community of faith, came after my own prayerful discernment, the kind of prayer I’ve just told you about. Like I said last week, as we journeyed through the discernment process, I came to realize that you, Covenant, cannot move into God’s future while I am here representing a direct link to the past. You need to be free to move into God’s amazing future for you. That future is there, but right now, in the present, you have questions...good! I encourage

you to ask them. Ask honest questions of each other, ask questions of the Session, ask questions of the Presbytery, and ask questions of God, ask those honest questions, and then in faith and discernment, listen for the honest answers. Then, let your requests be known to God and to each other, so that you may discover, individually and communally, the answers of who it is God is calling you to be, how God is calling you to serve, and what pastoral leadership you need to serve with you.

And finally, even before we have our answers, and even if we don't ever fully understand why and how something has happened, in a small or large context, let us learn from Paul and that powerful preposition that can change our experience. Let us give thanks to God not necessarily **for** something happening, but **in** and **through** it, because God is good, God is love, and God's light through Christ continues to shine...Thanks be to God!

1. Thompson, Marjorie, *Soul Feast An Invitation to the Spiritual Life*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky 1995; 85