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Abington Presbyterian Church

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Joel 2:21-27

1 Timothy 2:1-7

WITH THANKSGIVINGS

Some of you are aware that the heat in our Christian Education building wasn't working early this past week. That's the part of our facility where most of the staff offices are and also where our nursery school classes are housed. It got a bit chilly, so the children were moved to the two floors of the parish hall. What a good thing that we have teachers who could make things work even under trying circumstances. The staff got to figure out at what level they could run electric heaters in their offices without the circuit breakers flipping. It was eventually learned that the boilers were not the source of the problem, but that there was a valve was stuck shut. The hot water that normally heated the radiators couldn't flow through the circular system. Perhaps it was some corrosion and rust in the valve that caused the problem. In the middle of the day Wednesday, the efforts to get the water flowing again finally met with some success and the building gradually started to warm back up. That new flow of warm water led to a new flow of gratitude for those of us who were less than fully comfortable for a while.

Our scripture passage from Joel is an expression of gratitude in recognition of God's provision of food through trying times. The letter from the Apostle Paul calls for Christians to be praying people, but reminds us that prayer is not just a time to ask for what we lack, but to also give thanks for what God has provided. As we move toward a day called Thanksgiving, the brief chilly experience this past week left me wondering whether I need an encounter with deprivation now and then in order to have a strong sense of gratitude when the heat comes back on or some other blessing that was in short supply turns up. I'd frankly like to have a spirit of gratitude without necessarily having to go through the discomfort, in part because there seems to be something spiritually wrong if a warm feeling of gratitude is not continuously flowing on its own. All of this got me to thinking about the corrosive agents that can get into our systems that block up the valves, keeping a sense of warm gratitude from flowing through us.

At times, anxiety about what is going on in our crazy world or in our hectic lives can so corrode the flow of warmth that such a focus can keep us from recognizing the blessings we have known. For those who have suffered, bitterness can so fill the spaces in a heart that there is room for little else. Corrie Ten Boom was a Dutch watchmaker, a Christian, who worked with her family in the Netherlands to help many Jews escape the Nazi Holocaust during World War II by hiding them in her home. As a result of her efforts, she was eventually arrested and was sent to a concentration camp. ¹ She had many reasons to be filled with anxiety, but during that time, she wrote, “Worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow. It empties today of its strength.” ² The same is true about bitterness. Even in the most difficult of situations, Corrie found strength by finding reasons for gratitude. That is part of what sustained her.

There are some people who are very intent on understanding their own story as one where they try to convince themselves that they earned each and every accomplishment and material possession they have. They might be figuratively contorted, trying to constantly pat themselves on the back, rather than recognizing certain things about their life have come their way as blessings. That kind of corrosive attitude can cut off the flow of the joy of saying thanks to others who have been a blessing, including even God.

There are others who are focused primarily on their desires for more and more things or for higher status. This more-ism is another of the corrosive attitudes that can close down a rich flow of gratitude. How much room is there to recognize the blessings we have when there is an overriding obsession about the latest expensive toy for whatever age or for some elevated position that we hope will impress the impressionable? The last of the ten commandments refers to such longings for more and more as coveting, which squashes the possibilities for contentment and a sense of gratitude for what we already have.

The main time we say thanks to God may be when we pause before a meal. When we are about to eat is a great time to express our gratitude to God, but with a little reflection, we might come to realize that many of the things for which we could be thankful are not material things. I am grateful to be bolstered by the belief that God

loves us more than anyone else can. That basic belief leads to the great blessings of hope and joy and peace. I am thankful for sisters and brothers in the faith with whom I can journey as we seek to follow Jesus Christ as our Lord. There is the blessing of a sense of purpose that comes in our serving God and neighbor together through our work as a congregation.

It is a good spiritual exercise to make a list of blessings for which we could say thanks to God. But I hope we won't stop with just jotting down or verbalizing our gratitude. A deeper thanksgiving can be practiced by giving others a reason to be thankful as well. Our Deacons, with the help of the congregation, did that yesterday through delivering 42 food baskets to families in need. At a time when the numbers of people who are food insecure in our area has increased, what a good way to live out gratitude unto God! ³ Our context shows us opportunities to express that kind of thanks giving. The FBI just released a report showing that hate crimes against people of the Jewish or Muslim faiths had increased significantly in the last year. ⁴ This Tuesday, we have the opportunity to host the interfaith Thanksgiving community service. I am thankful that for many years, we have had Jews and Christians coming together in this service, which has been a way to demonstrate to the broader community that it is a good thing to have a Jewish presence in our community. The service this Tuesday will be the first time that there will be both Jewish and Muslim leadership and participation to join with the Christians in our community. Both of these worshiping communities feel vulnerable because of the hate crimes that have been taking place in our country, so here is an opportunity for us as Christians to stand against that kind of hatred and the threat of violence, saying we are thankful unto God for the American right to freely assemble along with the right to freely worship. This is a way that thanks giving can spread the gratitude.

We can also spread the gratitude by reaching out with care to those in our community who have suffered loss or to those who have felt rejected for who they are. Holidays can be quite difficult for the bereaved and the rebuffed.

I invite you to crank open the valves; let the warmth of gratitude flow within and through you. It enriches our lives as individuals and our life within community. It

is not a practice for just a few days each year, but a wholesome way to warm our hearts and those of others as well. Thanks be, thanks be unto God!

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corrie_ten_Boom

² Corrie ten Boom, Clippings From My Notebook, Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1982.

³ <http://www2.philly.com/philly/news/hunger-free-america-philadelphia-poverty-rate-food-insecurity-median-income-20181112.html>

⁴ <https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2017-hate-crime-statistics-released-111318>