

“Thankful for God’s People”

Psalm 111; Romans 1:8-12; Colossians 3:12-16

Regardless of the circumstances of our lives this Thanksgiving, we ought to all find it easy to be grateful for the people of grace that make up First UMC.



We approach another Thanksgiving . . . a day set aside to take stock of our many blessings and to thank God and many others for all that they have done for us. This year, like most, I find myself swamped with blessings. My cup runneth over, indeed.

I know how blessed I am to have Angee and our family. I love my work and am showered with appreciation from so many people at First UMC. I enjoy and respect my co-workers. Angee and I have a beautiful home and a little money in the bank. We’re healthy. . . . See, it is easy for me to come up with a long list.

Of course, this hasn’t always been the case in my life. I’ve been through great losses, grief, and assorted other problems. Some years, Thanksgiving had a hollow ring to it. And I know that this year there are people in our community for whom gratitude will not come easily. For them, there has simply been too much loss and pain.

But whether gratitude comes easily to us this Thanksgiving or with difficulty, we can all take the time to be grateful for the people who make up the fellowship of grace we call First UMC.

Rome, Colossae, Thessalonica

Of course, people of grace is what we ought to find at First UMC and every other community that calls itself Christian. We are recipients of God’s grace, and we are called to be givers of grace. Indeed, we are not simply urged or even commanded to be people of grace. Such grace-giving is simply part of who we are as Christians, new selves reborn into the body of Christ.

Paul is thankful for the people to whom he has been sent. Though he knows some of the Christians who have now returned to Rome, he doesn’t know most of the community. But he is thankful for them. He knows that when he finally comes to Rome, he will be encouraged by their faith, as I’m sure he was despite the circumstances of his arrival.¹ Indeed, he writes that their faithfulness is being spread throughout the world. Hyperbole? N. T. Wright:

Hyperbole it may be, but it is still no mean thing to say that the faith of the Roman church was proclaimed “in all the world.” Presumably this means that travelers known to Paul, not least Jewish Christians who had had to leave Rome under Claudius, were reporting the arrival in the capital of this strange new sect, neither ethnically Jewish (all the Christians in Rome for five years being Gentiles) nor pagan. There is unlikely to be a particular reason why he stresses their “faith” here, rather than, say, obedience (as in 16:19) or love (as in Col 1:8). What matters is that they are an authentic Christian congregation, for whom Paul thanks God through Jesus the Messiah (another formula that is hardly a formality). Paul often speaks of his “unceasing” prayers, referring probably to his keeping of regular times of prayer each day, though not excluding the sense of being “in prayer” at all times, standing in the presence of God with the churches on his heart and mind.²

Likewise, Paul is thankful for the Christians in Colossae:³ “In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all

¹ Paul doesn’t get to Rome until the early 60’s AD, and then it is as a prisoner of Rome. Though under house arrest, Paul was surely able to spend much time with the Christians in Rome.

² Wright, N. T. (1994–2004). The Letter of the Romans. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Vol. 10, p. 422). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

³ Colossae was a city in southwestern Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). By Paul’s day it was a city in decline, helped along by a calamitous earthquake in 60 or 61 AD.

the saints.” In today’s passage from Paul’s letter to the Colossians, he in turn urges them to be thankful, living out the new selves that they are in Christ.

Paul is thankful for the Christians in Thessalonica: “We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Thess. 1:2).

He is similarly thankful for the Christians in Corinth and in Philippi. Paul’s thankfulness for all these people shines through his letters despite their many problems and issues. Only Paul’s letter to the Galatians lacks any thanksgiving for the Christians there, but that’s a story for another day!

For years, Paul traveled around the Mediterranean, establishing colonies of a new human race. The colonists had been reborn in Christ and were filled with the very Spirit of the Lord God. In his kindness to and love of these people, Paul was not merely being encouraging and hopeful, but clear-eyed about the grace and the faith evidenced by these disciples of Jesus.

People of faith and grace

Grace is one of those words that we toss around a lot, often without thinking about what is really meant. I like the old-fashioned definition of grace: “unmerited favor.” If you deserve it, it isn’t grace. Well-deserved rewards maybe, but not grace. Grace means a gift that we have no right to expect . . . none . . . zero . . . zip.

One of my favorite movies is about grace. It came out about ten years ago and was titled *Lars and the Real Girl*, starring Ryan Gosling. You probably haven’t seen it, but I’m not giving the movie away by telling you that Lars is a troubled and socially alienated young man who finally gets a girlfriend by ordering a life-like, life-sized doll. For Lars, this doll is very much real, and he begins to build an elaborate delusion around it/her. As the community learns of Lars’ delusion, they might be expected to respond with ridicule. Poor Lars does seem completely nutty. But they don’t, believing that the way to help Lars is to go along with his delusion. Instead of ridicule, they respond with grace. Participating in Lars’ delusion is their gift to him; he is the recipient of their unmerited favor. And this grace takes them all to a very surprising place.

I remember that as I watched the movie, I thought, “Wow, what friends . . . shouldn’t we all have friends like that! Such caring, grace giving people.” And we knew that we do have such friends. Here, in this church family, there are countless people who would extend to us and to one another the same love and grace that Lars’ friends extended to him.

A Thanksgiving resolution

If you are deeply connected into the fellowship that is First UMC, I know that you have been richly blessed. If you are only marginally connected, I urge you to resolve to deepen your connection to this fellowship of believers. Join a connection group. Get involved in a class or group. Find places to serve. Yes, it means you must take the initiative, but if you do, I’m confident that next Thanksgiving, your prayers of gratitude will, like my own, include this family of grace.