

Sermon for Zion, October 18, 2020

Hymns: 267 – Rejoice, the Lord is King; 64 – Be Still and Know; 434 – For the beauty of the earth; 457 – Now thank we all our God

Scripture: Romans 12:9-18; Colossians 3:15-16

Sermon Title: The 16 Signs part 5 – Signs of the Mind – Peacefulness and Thankfulness

Romans 12:9-18

Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion.

Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.

Colossians 3:15-16

And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

We're approaching the end of our series on "The Sixteen Signs" – the sixteen indications Paul lays out in his letter to the Colossians of the Spirit of God at work in our lives and in our church. We've spent the last number of weeks looking at "Signs of the Heart" – compassion, kindness, humility and meekness – as well as "Signs of the Soul" – patience, tolerance, forgiveness, and love. This morning, we're going to take a quick tour through two of the four signs that have to do with four attitudes, or states of mind, that give evidence of the presence of the Spirit of God at work in us. They are Peacefulness, Thankfulness, Devotion, and Co-operation.

Why do I call these "Signs of the Mind?" Because it seems to me that people who have a mindset predisposed, or better yet determined to be peaceful, thankful, devoted and co-operative manage to be so despite their outward circumstances. We admire these people, and we wish we possessed these attributes as well. And the good news is, we can; Peacefulness, Thankfulness, Devotion, and Co-operation are there, waiting for us: Gifts of God, if only we reach out for them, and make them ours. And that can start today.

First off, then, peacefulness. Not peace; peacefulness. Don't get the two confused! They are entirely different things. Peace is a word which refers to the situation in which you find yourself. Peacefulness, however, is a word which refers to what's going on inside of you regardless of the situation in which you find yourself.

We know people like this. We know people who seem to maintain an even keel and an unpanicked core no matter how things are going to hell in a handbasket around them. People who seem to manage life as old Kipling put it: *"If you can keep your head when all about you, Are losing theirs and blaming it on you."* We know people like this. Both the keepers and the blamers.

We also know people – and maybe we count ourselves in their number – who seem to lack peace no matter how peaceful their situation, people who just can't seem to find a quiet centre in the midst of themselves, even when all is well. We know people like this. And so did Jesus.

The Sermon on the Mount, the great collection of Jesus' teaching, is as much about peacefulness, is as much about the futility of worry, as it is anything else. The Beatitudes, for instance – you know, the "Blessed Are ..." sayings. Much of what they convey tells us there is blessing even in the most dire of circumstances. Or how about this, right in the middle of it all (*Matthew 6:25-34 NIV*):

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?"

...So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Jesus isn't saying everything will necessarily be rosy; he very realistically wrapped things up with, *"each day has trouble enough of its own."* And you might say Amen to that. But he also says, "Look, while it is true that each day has trouble enough of its own, no-one has ever improved their situation, or added a single hour to their life by worrying about it." Here, Jesus and every doctor you've ever seen are in complete agreement. Instead, says Jesus, *"But seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."* Things like a peaceful heart.

Because peacefulness is not something we can manufacture within ourselves. Peacefulness is not self-delusion or denial. Some people confuse peacefulness with a refusal to acknowledge the reality of their situation. This is called Scarlett O'Hara syndrome. Remember her? Atlanta is burning to the ground, her whole world, her whole future is in flames, and she says, "*Fiddle-dee-dee. I can't think about that right now. If I do, I'll go crazy. I'll think about that tomorrow.*" And I'm sure you know people like that, too.

People with real peacefulness can think about the situation they are in, can face the struggles and difficulties of the day, can face the doctor's prognosis, and still have peace in their hearts. How? Because the peace they have inside is not a peace dependent upon how things are going on the outside, or upon how wonderful they themselves feel. Their peace comes from somewhere else – it comes from God. It is right there in our reading: "*And let the peace of God rule in your hearts,*" says Paul. Not the peace which comes from our situation. Not the peace which comes from self-delusion. No, "*let the peace of God rule in your hearts,*" he says. And that's a different peace altogether.

I remember, as a child, riding in the back seat of the old 65 Ford Falcon, traveling back home, in the midst of the classic "dark and stormy night." And it used to get a lot darker when I was a kid, and rainier, too. And the rain was hammering down and the old headlights were dim and the old wipers were hardly keeping up and the old tires were not up to the job, and while I have no recollection as to where we we'd been, I'll never forget the wonderful feeling of peace and security I had sitting on that red vinyl seat, no seat belt, cuddled up under a blanket, loving every minute, not wanting the drive to end, because my Dad was driving that car, and I knew that whatever happened outside, I was safe and dry and warm, because my Dad was driving that car, and if I was with my Dad, I was safe, I was sound, I was at peace.

And Jesus says, "Exactly." And Jesus says, "Your Heavenly Father knows, knows you, knows your situation, knows your needs. Seek Him first, seek his presence, know his presence, and cast your worry aside. Because in the face of it all, in the face even of death, *'my peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid* (John 14:27 NIV)."

The key to having peace in your heart is to have the peace of God within you, and that peace comes with prayer – with giving your life, your love, your hopes, your dreams, your fears, your worry, over to God. Every day. Every day. Start your day with a simple prayer. End your day with a simple prayer. When worry comes, pray again. Because despite the rain, despite the storm, despite the darkness outside, your Dad is driving that car. Prayer is like opening your eyes, and peeking out from under the blanket, and reminding yourself one more time who is really behind the wheel. And it is none other than your Heavenly Father. Your life is a journey, beginning to end, and your Dad – your

Father in Heaven - is driving. So let the peace of God rule in your heart. And leave the driving to Him.

“And be thankful.” Thankfulness is the second of our “Signs of the Mind,” and it is surprisingly close to “Peacefulness” when you think about it. Peacefulness is all about maintaining a *peaceful* attitude despite outward circumstances; thankfulness is about maintaining a *thankful* attitude despite outward circumstances. Not only when the table is laden with turkey and stuffing; but also when the cupboard is bare.

Again, you know people like this. You know people who are grateful for every little thing that comes their way. They open their eyes in the morning, and they are thankful for the day ahead. They sit down to breakfast, and are thankful for their morning coffee and oatmeal. They bump into you, and they seem genuinely thankful, genuinely delighted to see you. They hit adversity, and they are thankful for the friends, family and faith they have to help them through tough days. They lay their head on their pillow at night, and their last thought is a prayer of thanks for all the day had brought, and the promise of tomorrow. They sleep restfully and well. They are thankful. Thankfulness lives in their heart.

And you know the other kind too. People unhappy or grouching about every little thing that gets in their way. They open one eye in the morning, and swear at the alarm clock. They sit down for breakfast, and the coffee is giving them ulcers, they’re sick and tired of oatmeal. They spot you from a distance and cross to the other side of the street, hoping to not have to say “Good Morning” to you. Or anybody. They hit adversity, and now their life is completely in the toilet, they have it worse than anyone they – or you – know. They lay their head on their pillow, and their last thought is, “Why me?” They dread tomorrow. They sleep fitfully, and awake unrefreshed. They are not thankful. Ingratitude lives in their heart.

Which are you? Which would you rather be? How can we be thankful, even for the little things, even when life isn’t going particularly well, or is, in fact, going quite badly?

Just as with peacefulness, what you’re looking for here is not a thankfulness dependent upon how things are going on the outside, or upon how wonderful we ourselves are. The thankfulness we need is one which comes from somewhere else – it comes from God. It is a thankfulness, in fact, directed towards God; not a thankfulness arising from and directed towards just what we might happen to get, or be enjoying right at this moment in time. It is a thankfulness arising from the awareness that everything in our lives, including the very gift of life itself, comes to us undeserved. Comes to us as a gift. Comes to us from the very hand, the very heart, of God. It is right there in our reading: “*And **be** thankful,*” says Paul. Not thankfulness which arises from over-abundance or selfishness. Not just when everything is grand. “***Be** thankful,*” he says,

“Always.” “Give thanks in all circumstances,” Paul writes in another letter, “for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 5:18)” And that’s a different kind of thankfulness altogether. It’s is a thankfulness which we inhabit, by making it a habit.

Which is why I think this kind of thankfulness, just like this kind of peacefulness, can come only with prayer. I think this kind of thankfulness can come to us only when we begin, and end, and intersperse each day, with simple prayers of thanksgiving to God. When things are going well, thank you God, for all you give us to enjoy. When things are just cruising along, thank you God, for enabling us to carry on. When things are going bad, when the cupboard is bare and the applecart is upset and the well is dry, thank you God, because you are there, you have been there, you will be there, and I don’t have to go through this alone. That’s developing a habit of thankfulness. Our forefathers and foremothers in the faith, as long as three thousand years ago, put it like this (Psalms 107:1-15 NRSV):

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, those he redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to an inhabited town; hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress... Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind. For he satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things.

Some sat in darkness and in gloom, prisoners in misery and in irons, for they had rebelled against the words of God, and spurned the counsel of the Most High. Their hearts were bowed down with hard labour; they fell down, with no one to help. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress; he brought them out of darkness and gloom, and broke their bonds asunder. Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind.

This Psalm is a wonderful story of people encouraged to be thankful to God “for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind,” despite the current circumstances – in trouble, wandering, hungry, thirsty, gloomy, miserable, tired, overworked - in which we might find ourselves.

Today’s other attributes – devotion and cooperation – flow naturally out of peacefulness and thankfulness. For when we carry peace and gratitude within us, it is as a result of our devotion to God. And when we exhibit peacefulness and thankfulness in our daily lives and our relationships with others, we naturally work cooperatively together, untroubled by the difficulties and challenges we face in working together with others.

Think of the people you most enjoy working with, being with – is it the easily panicked and bitter person, the worrier and complainer, or is it the calm, centred soul, appreciative of the opportunity? Be that person, and you will find that you face no task alone, but that others look forward to sharing the task with you.

Start every day thankful; end every day thankful; eat every meal thankful; thankful for all God has done, does, will do; for all that comes to your life, thankfully aware for every breath you take, for every morsel of food, for every sip of water, for everyone you love, for everything – start every day thankful, live every day thankful, end every day thankful, and before you know it, it will be to you as natural as breathing, your spirit thankful and at peace, no matter what might come. It will be a life-changing, soul-enriching habit which will draw you closer to God, and closer to the person you want to be.

When you have a mindset blessed by the presence of the Spirit of God, predisposed, or better yet determined to be peaceful, to be thankful, you will manage to be so despite your outward circumstances. And the good news is, Peacefulness and Thankfulness are there, waiting for us: Gifts of God, if only we reach out for them, and make them ours. And that can start today. For which I am thankful to God. Amen.

The hymn we are going to sing to conclude the service is, “Now Thank We All Our God.” Why this hymn? Kenneth Osbeck tells the story:

From some of the severest sufferings imaginable during the 30 Years’ War of 1618 to 1648 - a war that has been described as the most devastating in all history - this great hymn of the church was born.

Martin Rinckart was called at the age of 31 to pastor the State Lutheran Church in his native city of Eilenberg, Germany. He arrived there just as the dreadful bloodshed of the 30 Years’ War began, and there Rinckart spent the remaining 32 years of his life faithfully ministering to these needy people.

Germany, the battleground of this conflict between warring forces from various countries throughout Europe, was reduced to a state of misery that defies description. The German population dwindled from 16 million to 6 million. Because Eilenberg was a walled city, it became a frightfully over-crowded refuge for political and military fugitives from far and near. Throughout these war years several waves of deadly diseases and famines swept the city, as the various armies marched through the town, leaving death and destruction in their wake. The plague of 1637 was particularly severe. At its height Rinckart was the only minister left alive to care for the sick and dying, performing up to 50 funerals a day, 4000 in a single year, including that of his own wife.

In spite of such personal hardship and loss, Martin Rinckart’s triumphant, personal expressions of gratitude and confidence in God in the face of such devastation and horror brought hope and strength to all who sang:

*Now thank we all our God, with hearts and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things has done, in whom his world rejoices;
Who from our mother’s arms has blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.*

Rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; let us sing with hearts of thanksgiving, and go forth in the peace which comes from God.