

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
WILLMAR, MN
September 13, 2020**



Prelude

Welcome to Worship

Friends, we are doing worship in a new way during this season. Welcome to those of you who are here in the sanctuary. It is a joy to have you back. Many of you have good reason to still be joining us virtually. We miss you, but we understand. And we look forward to when all of us will be able to be together again safely. Let me assure you, wherever you are, we are still the church. The church has always been the people, not the building in which we gather. Even if we are not all together in this place, we are together in worship today by the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives and by the digital signal that helps us connect to one another.

[Jill Announcement]

Wherever you are, and whether you are participating in worship live or as a recording, this is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Please join me in the Call to Worship.

Call to Worship

One: People of God, bless the Lord,

All: Bless God's holy name.

One: For as the heavens are high above the earth,

All: So great is God's steadfast love for us.

Preparing Our Hearts

“He Has Made Me Glad”

words and music by Leona Von Brethorst
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I will enter His gates with thanksgiving in my heart;
I will enter His courts with praise.
I will say, “This is the day that the Lord has made!”
I will rejoice for He has made me glad.

(Chorus)

He has made me glad,
He has made me glad,
I will rejoice for He has made me glad.

(Chorus)

He has made me glad,
He has made me glad,
I will rejoice for He has made me glad.

I will enter His gates with thanksgiving in my heart;
I will enter His courts with praise.
I will say, “This is the day that the Lord has made!”
I will rejoice for He has made me glad.

(Chorus)

He has made me glad,
He has made me glad,
I will rejoice for He has made me glad.

(Chorus)

He has made me glad,
He has made me glad,
I will rejoice for He has made me glad.

Opening Prayer

One: Let us confess our sins to God who forgives and saves.

**All: Gracious and loving God,
you lived for us – we have not lived for you.
You have forgiven us –
we have not forgiven others.
You have loved us – we have not loved ourselves
nor have we loved one another.
Take pity on us and forgive us, God.
Help us to forgive.
Help us to live for you.
Help us to love through Christ our Lord.
Amen.**

One: People of God, our sins are forgiven.
God is merciful and gracious and is
Lord of us all.
Reconciled to the God who loves us,
let us live and love through Christ our Lord.

Hymn

“Thank You Lord”

words and music by Don Moen and Paul Baloche
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I come before You today,
And there's just one thing that I want to say;
Thank You, Lord, thank You, Lord;
For all You've given me, for all the blessings that I cannot see,
Thank You, Lord, thank You, Lord;

(Pre-Chorus)

With a grateful heart, with a song of praise,
With an outstretched arm I will bless Your name.

(Chorus)
Thank You, Lord,
I just want to thank You, Lord;
Thank You, Lord,
I just want to thank You, Lord;
Thank You, Lord.

For all You've done in my life,
You took my darkness and gave me Your light;
Thank You, Lord, thank You, Lord;
You took my sin and my shame,
You took my sickness and healed all my pain,
Thank You, Lord, thank You, Lord;

(Pre-Chorus)
With a grateful heart, with a song of praise,
With an outstretched arm I will bless Your name.

(Chorus)
Thank You, Lord,
I just want to thank You, Lord;
Thank You, Lord,
I just want to thank You, Lord;
Thank You, Lord.

(Chorus)
Thank You, Lord,
I just want to thank You, Lord;
Thank You, Lord,
I just want to thank You, Lord;
Thank You, Lord.
Thank You, Lord.

Scripture Lesson

Psalm 136:1-4

- ¹ O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.
² O give thanks to the God of gods,
for his steadfast love endures forever.
³ O give thanks to the Lord of lords,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
⁴ who alone does great wonders,
for his steadfast love endures forever;

I Thessalonians 5:16-18

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Message

“Thanks-Giving and Thanks-Living” Rev. Leanne B. Thompson

It’s not officially autumn yet, but it was hard to tell this week. The weather was cool and rainy. My Facebook feed was full of “back to school” photos - definitely an improvement over divisive political rhetoric, which is also I sign of the season - and, Pumpkin Spice *everything* is back. Pumpkin Spice used to be reserved for Thanksgiving and Pumpkin Pie. But now it is a fixture of the entire autumn season and the flavor du jour for everything: coffee; ice cream; Oreos; lip balm. To be honest, I’m not really a fan of Pumpkin Spice. I realize saying that is almost as divisive as admitting I like pineapple on my pizza. But there it is; I don’t love Pumpkin Spice. I do, however, love Thanksgiving. I realize that Thanksgiving is still a couple of months away. But if the arrival of Pumpkin Spice can creep earlier into the season, maybe its OK if our celebration of Thanksgiving creeps a little earlier into the season as well.

In fact, I have good theological and pastoral reasons for inviting you on a journey of Thanksgiving a little early this year.

In the church, autumn is when we celebrate Stewardship Season. Its not much of a holiday I realize. You won't find any greeting cards to wish each other a Happy Stewardship Commitment Sunday. But it is a season that is critically important to the functioning of our church. Stewardship is the way we express our generosity in our life and work together. Stewardship is the commitment each of us makes to *be* the church. We each do our part to contribute to fulfilling our shared vision of being, "the church with heart in the heart of Willmar." During stewardship season, we encourage you to prayerfully consider what you will be able to commit to giving in the coming year and ask you to fill out a pledge card. Practically speaking, we need to know what to expect so that we can build a budget and live faithfully within our means. Spiritually speaking, we are asking you to step out in faith together and remain open to the moving of the Holy Spirit, inviting us into new ways of loving God and loving our neighbors. Spiritually, we are asking you to make faith a priority in your life by putting your money where your heart is - or putting your money where we hope your heart will follow.

But this is an unusual year. And its hard to stand up here and ask you to be generous when I know how much so many of you are struggling. Some of you are struggling financially. Some of you are struggling with loneliness and isolation. Some of you are struggling with anxiety at the state of the world. Some of you are struggling with the loss of familiar activities and routines. It feels like we have lost so much in this season of pandemic. And some are losing even more, to hurricane, flood, and fire. I believe that what we need during this season is a reboot. We need an antidote to the fear that threatens to consume us. We need to return to the basics, the essence of Christian living. Yes, I certainly hope we will find ways to be generous during this stewardship season. But before we can be generous, we need to rediscover what it means to be thankful.

When Paul wrote his first letter to the church in Thessalonica, he was writing to a church that knew all about hardship and struggle. They had faced fierce opposition from both the Jewish synagogue and pro-Roman city fathers. It was not easy to be a Christ follower in Thessalonica. But the church there held on to their faith and found ways to practice radical hospitality. They had gotten hung up on some finer points of theology and were experiencing some discord because of it. Paul, being Paul, set them straight on that, and then he reminded them of what was truly mattered, calling them back to the simple essentials of

Christian living: be open to God and pray always; be honest, but live with hope; and thank God for all we have.

Christians have, over the years, been referred to as “people of the Word.” And that is true. We follow not only the word of God as contained in scripture, but the living Word in the person of Jesus Christ. But it would also be appropriate to call us “the people of Thanksgiving.” One of our core practices as people of faith is to gather around the Table. This table. We call what we do here Celebrating the Lord’s Supper as it was instituted by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. But there is a more formal and more ancient title for this meal – The Eucharist. When we share this feast at the table of our Lord, we are celebrating the Eucharist. Eucharist – Eucharisteo – is the Greek word for *thanksgiving*. When we share this feast at the table of our Lord, we are celebrating *thanksgiving*. Giving thanks is fundamental to the life of faith. More than that, it is fundamental to our health and well-being.

We come to this table for so many reasons. We come because we are hungry and need to be fed. We come because we are sick and need to be healed. We come because we are tired and need rest. We come because we need encouragement, compassion, or grace. We come because we need to renew our connection to our life-giving, joy-giving God. We come because when life is the most challenging, that is when it is the hardest to be thankful. And that is when it is most necessary.

The church has been teaching us to practice gratitude for generations. As long as we have been gathering around the Table of our Lord. Now science backs up what we have been doing all along. Many studies – many studies – over the past decade have found that people who count their blessings tend to be happier and less depressed. Some studies have found that a daily practice of gratitude can actually rewire and reprogram your brain.

Something as simple as writing down three things you are grateful for every day for 21 days in a row significantly increases your level of optimism, and the effects last for the next 6 months. Other studies show gratitude increases willpower and helps keep you calm. The research, according to Harvard researcher Shawn Achorhas, suggests,

“the more practice you give your brain at feeling and expressing gratitude, the more it adapts to this mindset – you could even think of

your brain as having a sort of gratitude ‘muscle’ that can be exercised and strengthened...the more of an effort you make to feel gratitude one day, the more the feeling will come to you spontaneously in the future.

In short, practicing gratitude seems to kick off a healthful, self-perpetuating cycle in your brain – counting your blessings now makes it easier to notice and count them later. And the more good you see in your life, happier and more successful you’re likely to be.”¹

Eucharisteo. Thanksgiving. A daily practice of gratitude. Counting your blessing. What ever you choose to call it, it can have a profound effect on your well-being. It is, indeed, the antidote to much of what ails us. It can reorient us to an attitude of celebration instead of anxiety. It can remind us, when fear sets in, that we are loved and cared for. As Ann Voskamp, author of *One Thousand Gifts* reminds us, “Gratitude isn’t only a celebration when good things happen. Gratitude is a declaration that God is good no matter what happens.”

If you are a person who likes to read and you are interested in learning more about how to implement a practice of gratitude in your life and what kind of impact that can have on your spiritual life, I can give you some reading suggestions. But *all of you* can start today with the very simple practice of giving thanks. Do it the moment your eyes open in the morning so that it is your first thought of the day, or do it when you crawl into bed at night so that it is your last thought before falling asleep. If you would like to do something a little more formal, you can start a journal where you keep your list and make a commitment to add 3, or 5, or 20 items each day. It is my hope that we would become so comfortable giving thanks that it is our natural state of being. It is my hope that Thanksgiving would become the reality we celebrate every day, not just on one holiday each year.

It might be difficult at first. We are so hardwired to believe that “thanksgiving” is a conditional response to something good happening in our lives. It may take us awhile to discover that “thanksgiving” is the foundation for joy in spite of what is happening in our lives. That’s why the decision to practice gratitude is a spiritual discipline – a commitment to a practice that will help shape us.

¹ https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_gratitude_changes_you_and_your_brain

On those days when you are feeling beaten down and it is challenging to pause and find something for which you can give thanks, on those days when counting your blessings feels uninspired, like you are just going through the motions naming the same 5 items every day, remember that what you are doing is transformational, even if you can't see it yet.

In an article titled "The Art of Thanksgiving," Wilferd A Peterson talks about acts of "thanksgiving." He suggests that practicing thanksgiving can change how we interact with the world, making us kinder, more compassionate, more generous people. He articulates this idea that practicing thanksgiving in our own lives can change us so that we change the world around us. He says this, "The art of thanksgiving is thanksgiving. It is gratitude in action. It is applying Albert Schweitzer's philosophy: 'in gratitude for your own good fortune you must render in return some sacrifice of your life for the other life.'"

I don't know about you, but that sounds like stewardship to me. You can be sure that we will spend more time unpacking "thanks-living" in the coming weeks of stewardship season. We will, indeed, pause to give thanks together. But I offer you this challenge. Make giving thanks part of your own life, in whatever way works for you. Find something to be thankful for every day. It may or may not be Pumpkin Spice, but find something.

Alleluia! Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray to the Lord, saying,
Loving God, **hear our prayer.**

Loving God:
we pray for those who are sick or in trouble.
Heal their disease, relieve their distress,
and return to them the joy of salvation.
Loving God, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for all who suffer the violence of war or natural disaster.
Bring an end to violence that destroys human flourishing;
help us live in peace with our neighbor
and enable us to dwell in harmony with the earth.

Loving God, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for children
and for all who depend upon the support of others.
Protect the vulnerable, shelter the weak,
and give strength and wisdom to those who care for them.
Loving God, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for elected officials and civil servants.
Stir up in them a desire for justice,
enable them to fulfill their responsibilities with integrity,
and drive from them any spirit of selfish gain.
Loving God, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for pastors, teachers,
and all the saints who lead your church.
Grant them wisdom to know your truth
and give them courage to live as faithful disciples of Jesus.
Loving God, **hear our prayer.**

Loving God, you have crowned us with
steadfast love and mercy.
Receive our prayers and help us to trust your goodness;
through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

And now, with the confidence of the children of God,
we pray the prayer which Jesus taught us:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread; and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Invitation to the Offering

You are aware by now that we are not passing an offering plate during this season. We invite you to leave your offering in the plate by the door on your way out of the sanctuary, or you may continue to send your offering to the church or give online. I want to thank you for continuing to give generously.

Your gifts allow us to continue to be the church. So, I would like to take this moment to say thank you, and to bless your financial offerings and the offering of your lives.

Offering Prayer

Almighty God,
receive these gifts that we offer with grateful hearts
and use our lives for the ministry of your Son, Jesus Christ,
in whose name we pray.
Amen.

Hymn of Preparation

“Come to the Table of Grace” (GG, 507)

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Come to the table of grace.
Come to the table of grace.
This is God’s table; it’s not yours or mine.
Come to the table of grace.

2. Come to the table of peace...
3. Come to the table of love...
4. Come to the table of hope...
5. Come to the table of joy...

Celebration of Holy Communion

Invitation

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, family of faith,
I invite you to place the communion elements you have gathered before you,
or hold on to the ones you picked up as you came into the sanctuary today.

This is the feast we get to share together today.
This is not a Presbyterian Table; this is the Lord’s table.
All who trust in him are invited to share in this feast
which is both humble and mysterious.

This was just a cup filled with the fruit of the vine
(gesture towards the cup)

this was just ordinary bread, baked for guests
(gesture towards the bread)

until Jesus took them
took and drank from the cup,
even though it was his cup of pain,
filled with the agony of the world;
took and broke the bread –
even though his body
was too young to be broken.

This *(gesture towards self)*,
and these *(gesture to the community)*
would be ordinary lives
unless the bread, unless the cup,
is poured into them:
and the mystery of grace takes place.

Come, not because you fully understand,
but because you need to reach out
and receive the life that is offered to you.

Words of Institution

On the night before Jesus died,
he gathered with his friends to have supper.
The meal moved towards its conclusion,
and Jesus called for bread and wine.

He took the bread, broke it, gave thanks and said:
this is my body, broken for you.
Do this to remember me.

He took the cup, gave thanks, and said:
this is my blood of the new covenant,
which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.

Friends, wherever you are,
I invite you to hold up the elements
and receive this blessing:

Blessing

Come, Holy Spirit, come.
Bless this bread and
bless this fruit of the vine.
Bless all of us in our eating and drinking
that our eyes might be open,
that we might recognize the risen Christ in our midst,
indeed in one another.
Come, Holy Spirit, come.
Amen.

Sharing the Feast

This is the bread of life. (partake)
This is the cup of salvation. (partake)

Post Communion Blessing

Holy God,
you have fed us all
out of your own generous and gracious hands.
From them, we have received welcome,
nourishment, hope, and consolation.

May these things grow in us,
alongside the gift of faith,
so that we may plant their seeds
in the world around us.

Through the Holy Spirit,
guide us in the days ahead
to re-member our place
in your great and on-going story
of resurrection, redemption, and restoration

through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Closing Hymn

“Forever”

words and music by Chris Tomlin
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Give thanks to the Lord our God and King;
His love endures forever.
For He is good, His is above all things;
His love endures forever.
Sing praise sing praise.

With a mighty hand and outstretched arm;
His love endures forever.
For the life that's been reborn;
His love endures forever.
Sing praise sing praise. Praise.

Sing praise, sing praise.
Forever God is faithful,
Forever God is strong,
Forever God is with us,
Forever, forever.

From the rising to the setting sun
His love endures forever.
And by the grace of God we will carry on;
His love endures forever.
Sing praise sing praise. Praise.

Sing praise, sing praise.
Forever God is faithful,
Forever God is strong,
Forever God is with us,
Forever, forever.

Charge and Benediction

Go in peace,
practice forgiveness,
live the gospel,
in the name of Jesus, our Lord.

The blessing of God be with you,
the love of Jesus fill you,
and the power of the Holy Spirit sustain you,
now and forevermore.
Amen.