

As Thanksgiving approached one year, a woman offered to host her family for Thanksgiving dinner. As the holiday approached, she cleaned her house. She polished the silver. She bought fresh flowers. And she made all the typical holiday dishes - all from scratch. Thanksgiving Day finally arrived, the guests were welcomed, and after socializing with those they had not seen in awhile everyone sat down to eat at the extended table that was set up on an enclosed patio. The mother turned to her teenage daughter and asked her to offer the meal blessing. The daughter hesitated, saying *"I don't know what to say."* *"Just pray what you've heard me pray,"* the mother replied. *"Ok,"* the girl said, with a shrug. Then she bowed her head, folded her hands, and in a tone of exasperation said *"Dear Lord, why did we invite all these difficult people to dinner?"*

Psalm 136 tells us to *"give thanks to the Lord, for he is good."* In Colossians, we are told to *"be thankful."* And in Psalm 100, we are commanded not only to have *"joy"* and *"gladness in our hearts"* but also to enter into worship with *"joyful songs"* and *"thanksgiving."* Which can be hard. Especially over the last year as we have been tempted to moan and groan our way through the difficulties of a pandemic. And that doesn't even touch on the issues we need to deal with when it comes to being thankful for the difficult people God has placed us in the midst of: ornery family members, cantankerous friends, annoying church members, and those horrible people on the other side of the political aisle who we may be tempted to say are ruining our country.

Yet as we heard tonight, Paul wrote to the Ephesians saying *"I have not stopped giving thanks for you."* Since it is unlikely Paul was able to write those words - and sincerely give thanks for those persons - because the people in Ephesus were perfectly loving and entirely gracious (and not ever ornery, cantankerous, annoying or horrible), Paul must have found a way to be *"thankful"* for people even when they were not always living like the *"saints"* they were called to be. And I think the way Paul found to be *"thankful"* may not only have something to do with the words of Psalm 100, but also why we have gathered tonight.

That is because in Psalm 100 the psalmist writes *"know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture."* So that is where we need to start if we want to be thankful. For while we may have heard those words before, we may not have taken time to ponder the implications of what they mean - particularly in reference to ornery family members, cantankerous friends, annoying church members, and those horrible people on the other side of the political aisle who we may be tempted to say are ruining our country. But let's take a few minutes to ponder those implications. That is because the implications of what it means to believe that we are *"the sheep of His pasture"* can be life changing.

The first thing being the sheep of God's pasture means is that we are not perfect. For just as real sheep are dependent on a human shepherd to keep them from getting in trouble and reaping the consequences of their stupidity, we humans are dependent on God not to get in trouble and reap the consequences of our stupidity. We hear this fact spoken about every day on the news in stories of the dysfunction of all levels of our nation's government. We hear this fact spoken about in stories about the disagreements over what is the *"truth"* about the Covid-19 virus and how to keep ourselves (and others) safe from it. And we hear this fact spoken about in stories about the division,

mistrust, and ANGER that has come to permeate a nation which ironically claims to be “*one nation under God.*”

In the Disciple Bible study program this is what is called our “*human condition,*” the situation we find ourselves in when we live only in our own human strength and not in the power of the Holy Spirit (trusting in God, depending on God, and allowing God to empower us through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit). But that is only the situation because we are not morally perfect, but fallen and sinful creatures. And as a result, we all too often therefore hurt one another, offend one another, and do all sorts of things we shouldn’t do. Which leads us to the second implication we need to ponder about the meaning of being “*the sheep of His pasture.*”

The second thing being a sheep of God’s pasture means is that God is perfect. God always does what it right. God always does that which is loving. And God always lays out the way for us to receive His “*wisdom,*” and “*be enlightened*” by the Holy Spirit, and - as a result - be able to “*know the hope to which he has called*” us (as Paul told the Ephesians). And because God is not only perfect, but perfect love (as the Apostle John says), God cares for us with even more care and compassion than a shepherd feels for his sheep. Which is why on the Day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit was sent into the world in a new way. And in that new way, God offered us imperfect sheep the ability to live a different kind of life: a spiritual life, a holy life, a righteous life.

And that is important because the holy and righteous spiritual life the perfect Great Shepherd offers us isn’t designed just to make us perfect enough to get into heaven. It is designed to help us in the here and now of this difficult and distressing world behave perfectly in the midst of the dysfunction of all levels of our nation’s government. It is designed to help us perfectly wade through the disagreements over what can be considered the “truth” about the virus and how to keep ourselves (and others) safe from it.

And it is designed to help us perfectly heal the division, mistrust, and ANGER that has come to permeate a nation which ironically claims to be “*one nation under God.*” And nowhere are those facts more important than the call of Psalm 100 to be perfectly THANKFUL as we interact with the imperfect PEOPLE around us, including ornery family members, cantankerous friends, annoying church members, and those horrible people on the other side of the political aisle who we may be tempted to say are ruining our country.

Which is not easy to do. After all, while the Great Shepherd is perfect, we are not. And because we are not, we are not always prone to be thankful. But there is a way to get to the point that we can follow the admonition to “*enter His gates with thanksgiving.*” To get there, we need to use the grace offered to us by the Holy Spirit to make the commitment to do several things.

First, we need to make the commitment to focus on what we have, not what on what we don’t. Which means more than looking at what we possess or how much money we have in the bank. We learned this when our son Stephen was young. As he began to crawl, we noticed that when he heard a noise to his left, his head would snap around to look. But when there was a noise to his right, he’d

turn his whole body in that direction as if he had a stiff neck. This worried us, so we took him to the doctor. The doctor examined him, and agreed that there seemed to be a physical reason he was doing this (and not a behavioral quirk). When the x-ray results came back, we were told he had a deformed clavicle. So in trepidation, we took him to duPont Children's Hospital in Wilmington for a surgical consultation. It didn't take long for the trepidation to give way to gratitude however. For even if he was going to need surgery, he was still better off than so many of the children we saw around us at duPont who were suffering from Cancer, Leukemia, and a host of other incurable diseases and physical deformities.

Second, we need to make the commitment to focus on our blessings, not our difficulties. Which means focusing on the positive things we see God doing in our lives rather than the places where we - in our fallen and sinful understanding - mistakenly believe we do NOT see God at work. For when we focus on the mistaken places where we do not THINK God is at work, we can miss out on the places God IS at work, and thereby miss the blessings through which we could be growing in thankfulness. We learned this too with our son Stephen. For while it was not joyful news to hear that he had a physical deformity that might need surgery, we chose not let that sad news change how we viewed - or walked with - God. Instead, we focused on what God might do through the surgery and not moan because of a mistaken belief that God had not done something to prevent Stephen's clavicle from failing to grow properly. Which turned out to be a good thing because when the doctors at duPont took their own x-rays, they told us they did not see evidence of a deformed clavicle. Instead, they told us they saw that a muscle in his neck had not grown to its proper length. So it just needed to be stretched by physical therapy. So for the next several months, we thankfully rang Stephen's little neck each time we changed his diaper.

Finally, we need to make the commitment to focus on finding our joy in God alone. That is because only God is perfect. So only God will never let us down, never say the wrong thing, never behave poorly toward us. This is because our fellow sheep are just as imperfect as we are. So they will never be able to behave perfectly toward us. They will, despite their best efforts and love for us, behave the same sinful ways we behave. And as a result, they will occasionally hurt us, offend us, and do things to us they shouldn't do. And that will produce feelings in us other than joy, and thankfulness. But if we realize that fact about our fellow sheep, and are willing to forgive their imperfections the way God forgives our imperfections, we can have a semblance of thankfulness in how we go about each day as "*the sheep of God's pasture.*"

For the perfect God will be with us no matter what bad situations befall us. The perfect Savior will be working to save us no matter how many times we mess up. And the perfect and GOOD shepherd, will be offering to enable us to be thankful even when we are harassed by the behavior of our fellow sheep. To help us remember those promises, and this very night ask God to help us be more fully thankful for the CORNUCOPIA OF BLESSINGS He has given us, let us recite together the 23rd Psalm. To do so, we'll use the traditional phrasing in the UM Hymnal:

The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul:
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me.
Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me
in the presence of mine enemies;
Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life:
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.