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Philippians 4:4–14, NRSVue.

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⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ As for the things that you have learned and received and heard and noticed in me, do them, and the God of peace will be with you.

¹⁰ I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me but had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹ Not that I am referring to being in need, for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹² I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me. ¹⁴ In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.*

The Lord is near.

I recently talked to an old associate, a fellow professor whom I hadn't seen in several years. We used to meet up at least three or four times a year on the academic conference circuit. But both of us have now retired. He called me out of nowhere because someone had told him that I had become a reverend. I was sure that he would be surprised, but he told me that he could easily see me as a pastor.

Then I asked him what he was up to in retirement. He said that he was a reverend. “What?” I asked. He said, yes, that he was a couple of years behind me, but after he retired, he too went to the seminary. Interestingly, while I had gone to an ultra-liberal, wild-eyed seminary, Iliff in Denver, he had gone to a similarly small, but very conservative seminary. Let’s call him Walter. We talked a bit about that difference between liberal and conservative Christianity. He volunteered before I could say it that it’s too bad that we can’t all get along better, that churches should be places where all are welcome, even if our politics differ. We’re all made in God’s image and once we walk inside these doors, only our shared faith should matter. Then he told me the real reason he was calling: to get my opinion about something. It turns out that he had founded a small church in an East Coast city but had had to move away temporarily because an adult child of his had had a stroke, probably due to COVID. They had given him an indefinite leave of absence and had hired a temporary pastor, a retired person, who was quite willing to work until Walter was available again. What he wanted to do was say thanks to his congregation for supporting him, for giving him so much time to help his son get his health back.

I asked him if he had ever read Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Walter laughed. He said that indeed, the letter had been written in part to say thanks to a

congregation. Was I suggesting that he write a letter? I said yes, write something that can be read aloud to your congregation during a service, then posted on your church website and emailed to the entire congregation. Do what Paul did, write a letter that says thanks but also tells the members of his congregation just what they mean to him. Then we talked about Philippians for a while.

As some background, Philippi had previously been called Datus, and it had many freshwater springs. Then Phillip II of Macedon decided to fortify it as a stronghold against the Thracians – and he renamed it for himself. That was in 356 B.C. Shortly after this, its population quickly grew. Phillip ramped up production in the local gold mines, turning it into a wealthy city. But the gold eventually ran out and the city fell into decline. It was situated in north-eastern Greece. Its remains are today located on an ancient route that links Europe and Asia. Eventually, in the middle of the second century B.C. it came under the control of the Roman Empire. Paul's founding of the church in Philippi is recorded in the Book of Acts, Chapter 16. In the middle of the first century A.D., Paul, along with some unnamed companions, walked into Philippi. They found a city that was once again up and coming, if not quite flourishing. The citizenry consisted of Greeks, Romans, native Thracians, and a sprinkling of foreigners. There was a handful of Jews. The

population was about 15,000. There were people practicing Greek, Egyptian, and Roman pagan faiths. The Imperial cult, the state religion of Rome, was quite popular. Paul and his associates set sail from Troas to Macedonia. They trekked overland to Philippi. There, they met a Gentile named Lydia. In Acts, we're told that she is a dealer in purple cloth – a great luxury in that day. She is apparently the first convert in Greece. Lydia and her household are baptized. The church in Philippi was founded. Later, Paul and Silas get to a conflict with the owner of a slave girl, whom Paul exorcises. They end up in prison, where they are beaten, but an earthquake gets them released; the earthquake also gets a jailer and his family converted. The church in Philippi is growing. Eventually, with the church established, they leave Philippi. As usual, when he founded a church, he remains in contact through letters. Later, the faithful in Philippi send him, on at least two occasions, donations. These apparently sizeable donations are in large part the motivation for the letter.

We cannot be certain, but it is believed that Paul likely wrote this letter from Rome, where he was awaiting trial before Caesar. It is through this letter to the church in Philippi – which is bound to NOT be the only letter he wrote them – most of what we know about this church. We learn that Paul had a tremendous

commitment to this church. He refers to these people as partners in the Gospel, partakers of grace, and his brothers and sisters. They are his joy. The letter is more than a thank-you, though: there is clearly internal conflict in the church, and Paul encourages them to come together in the name of the Lord. The bottom line is that this church and Paul are dear friends. Let's look at some of the words of thanks that Paul has for this church. There is a lot more going on than money.

From the beginning of the letter:

³I thank my God for every remembrance of you, ⁴always in every one of my prayers for all of you, praying with joy ⁵for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.

We see that he is thankful for their “partnership in the gospel”, i.e., being his brothers and sisters in the faith. This last line, about his confidence in the good work that has begun in them is a reference, not to him, but God: he is crediting God with their faith. He goes on to say this:

It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because I hold you in my heart, for all of you are my partners in God's grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

He's also particularly thankful for their friendship and support, given that he is at that time a prisoner. He expresses their support as their sharing in God's protective grace with him, in other words, as their prayers and appeals to God for him.

Let's jump to the end of the letter. Paul writes this:

¹⁵ You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving except you alone. ¹⁶ For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. ¹⁷ Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. ¹⁸ I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. ¹⁹ And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. ²⁰ To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Paul waits until the end of the letter to make a major point. He's thanking the believers in the church at Philippi for a gift that was apparently passed onto Paul by someone named Epaphroditus. Paul says that they were the only church in Macedonia who gave him a gift. It seems from these remarks that Paul is a bit embarrassed by the gift. He seems to minimize the significance of the gift while at the same time acknowledging that it was very important to him. He might have been trying to make sure they didn't get the idea he was destitute; otherwise, they might send him more money. An important fact is that in his 2nd letter to the Corinthians, it says that this church in Philippi also gave to the church in Jerusalem; those folks were poor Jews. So, it's clear that the Philippi church is particularly giving in nature, and Paul probably thinks they have given enough for now. Also, when he says "*Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your*

account,” he’s trying to make it very clear that he values their faith more than any money he might receive from them. He does make it clear that God notices the gift and that spiritual profit “accumulates” to their account.

Let’s look now at the part of the letter that comes just before this final passage where he thanks them for the gift that Epaphroditus delivered.

¹⁰ I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me but had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹ Not that I am referring to being in need, for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹² I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me. ¹⁴ In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.*

This passage ends by leading into the offer of thanksgiving for the generous gift.

Paul says that he knows what it means to have a lot and to have nothing. Either way, he’s fine. All he needs is his faith. His strength comes from God, not worldly assets. Remember that Paul was a very successful, highly respected, educated man who gave it all up to go on the road, and live as a homeless pauper, in order to evangelize. But just before he begins to thank them for their gift, he says something entirely different. This is very famous:

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known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

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Paul is telling them at the closing of his letter, just before he gets to the nitty gritty of thanking them for once again being very generous to his missionary efforts, to always rejoice in God. This is something Paul does a lot in his letters – telling people to have joy because of their faith. He writes: “*The Lord is near.*” He doesn’t mean that the world is about to end. He means that God, Jesus, the Lord is always nearby. So, there is no need to be anxious about anything. Always pray to God. A peace that surpasses all else will protect you if you do so. He tells them to dwell on what they know is best, is the most holy, is the most pleasing to God. If they do this, then God will grant them peace.

Let’s get back to Walter. I hope you weren’t waiting to find out what he wrote to his church – because I don’t know. I haven’t talked to him since we had our conversation about how he should express his thanks. But we did talk about Paul’s letter to the Philippians and how Paul focused on two kinds of thanks. He

thanks the people of Philippi for their support, for their loyalty to him, for their love of him. These people remain faithful to him during his worst time, while in prison and waiting a potentially devastating sentence from the Roman authorities. But he is equally concerned about thanking the faithful in the prosperous, highly multi-ethnic city of Philippi for their faith, for their "*partnership in the Gospel*". He's thankful that they are indeed believers, that they have adopted the ways of Christ. They had accepted Jesus' challenge of living in peace, with love for all people, with forgiveness and grace. I'm going to guess that Walter thanked his congregation not just for supporting him, but for also accepting the teachings of Jesus Christ.

We should do what Paul did, and no matter how much we need the rewards of this world to survive, even if we use those rewards to support other people, the most important thing is what is in our hearts. It's our faith, our deep believe that indeed, "*the Lord is near*" – that's matters most of all. Please pray with me.

God, we thank you for the blessings we do have in life. We know that we have so much more than most people in this world. But we thank you most of all, not for the gift of homes and food and transportation and vacations and retirement funds, but rather, for the faith you have instilled in us. We know you are near. Amen.