

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Finally, beloved, 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.(Phil. 4:8)

This is a sermon in favor of large-heartedness and against littleness of mind and littleness of heart.

Of such littleness, I have been a sinner in the past, and I hope to do better going forward. Maybe you do too. At this past Monday Evening Bible Study, for example, the class laughed at me because I was ranting and raving about an out-of-town driver in our city. You have seen this before, I bet: I was walking along the Park Avenue sidewalk toward church, and I spied a Massachusetts car in the pedestrian cross-walk, inching forward, inching forward, wanting to make the right turn on red that most of America makes. Only, if you do that here in Manhattan, you might hit and hurt somebody. So, I was perturbed by this. I thought angry thoughts about the driver. In fact, though I was still midblock and the poor driver could hardly see me, I waved my arms at him, shoving him back — if only my wild gestures could move a car backwards. But, the driver paid me no mind, kept inching forward and finally made the right turn and merrily continued on his way, with me left brooding about the matter and about those doggone Red Sox and all the other ills of the world.

Now, life is too short for this. Not only that, such littleness of heart is inconsistent with Thanksgiving — I mean both the national holiday we celebrate tomorrow and with the apostolic exhortation we read tonight:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.(Phil. 4:4)

It is too little a thing for St. Paul to say “Rejoice” once. The matter is urgent enough that Paul rushes to repeat the word:

Rejoice in the Lord always; *again* I will say, Rejoice.

Well, it’s hard to rejoice in the Lord if you are always brooding about Massachusetts drivers.

To help us along toward a spirit of thanksgiving, St. Paul gives us some practical advice. For one thing, he urges forbearance in face of frustration:

⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone.

Emphasis here could well be on that phrase “known to everyone.” That is, do not manifest littleness of soul. If you have it, try to hide it. Let what people see be your forbearance. Because if you rant and rave and wave your arms all about, then it tends to make things worse, and then it is even harder to have a spirit of thanksgiving.

Next, Paul urges that we should be people of prayer, including people who offer prayers of thanksgiving:

⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

This business of prayer and thanksgiving is awfully interesting. As theologian Robert W. Jenson has pointed out, to offer prayers of thanksgiving is to confess our faith that the good we received came from God’s hands, that he *could have* withheld that good, and therefore we thank him that he did not withhold it. We do not

conduct ourselves as if the good just randomly happened, but instead we give the glory to God. And so it is that prayer translates grateful sentiments into concrete deeds of thanksgiving. We become a people of thanksgiving by actually giving thanks in prayer to God.

But it is St. Paul's third piece of practical advice that interests me most now. In simplest terms, Paul seems to be saying this: To have a spirit of gratitude, think about positive things. Lift your thoughts. Reckon with your blessings. Change your mood and change your thoughts by letting go of the Massachusetts drivers and thinking about better things. St. Paul puts it this way:

Finally, beloved, 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.

You see, from the apostolic point of view, we are not to be captive to our thoughts. We are not to be prisoners of whatever downhearted notion happens to be let loose in us by Massachusetts drivers. Instead, we are to be the master of our thoughts — not the victims, but the masters of our thoughts.

And do we not have some good things to think about? And to be grateful for? I mean, we have a Saviour. How desolate this life would be if we did not have a Saviour, but we do. He is Jesus of Nazareth, and he loves and is committed to us. We have the hope of heaven, including the joyful expectation of seeing our departed loved ones again. And if we have the kind of good things Governor William Bradford and the Pilgrims gave thanks for, then we should give thanks for them too — things such corn, wheat, squashes, garden vegetables, game from the forests, fish and clams from the sea, and some measure of peace in this world.

St. Paul speaks of peace — of a peace that passes all understanding. He is referring to a birthright of every Christian: your right to peace and a spirit of thanksgiving that goes beyond what the world might suppose is your lot in life. It is a peace that “surpasses human understanding” because it is built on our Savior Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.