

# Trinity United Methodist Church

November 24, 2019

“Yet....”

Pastor Dan Elmore

## Scripture: Habakkuk 3:17-18

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.

## Sermon

Would you pray with me as we get started this morning? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

We have a great holiday that is upon us later this week, and that is the game day rivalry between Virginia Tech and UVA. How many years has it been? We'll see if that continues.

No, the big holiday this week that most of us care more about is Thanksgiving, and our preparations are under way and so forth. One of the joys of Thanksgiving for my family, for I don't know how many of the last many years, is that we always go to the Bishop's house for Thanksgiving. That's pretty cool, huh? We always go to the Bishop's house for Thanksgiving. My mom's maiden name is Bishop. But boy, I put that on Facebook and I hooked some of my colleagues. They were like, "What, really? How do you get that invitation?"

But some families, I know, are like my aunt's side of the family. When her dad worked for the Richmond Times-Dispatch, they had a tradition of just collecting people for Thanksgiving. As the week went along, they'd ask people, "Hey, do you have somewhere to gather this Thanksgiving?" And if they said no, they said, "Well, now you do. You're coming to our house." And so we really didn't know who would show up from year to year. But there was one family that would come quite often. We got to know

them a bit, and there was a young woman in the family. Soon enough she grew up, and one year she invited a young man to join us for Thanksgiving that year.

Now let me back up a minute to tell you that one of my personal pet peeves has been that ever since I became a pastor, it's like everyone else in my family that used to pray at these big holiday meals forgot how to pray, and I've become the official "prayer" at any family gathering. I'm like, "Really? Dad, you used to pray." My grandfather used to pray; women have said the prayer. So anyway, that year I decided to have a little fun with it. So I came up next to this young man as the table's being set and we're figuring out who's sitting where and who's drinking what and so forth. I went up next to him and said, "By the way, just to give you a heads up, the tradition in our family here is that we usually go around the table and we share what our favorite hymn is, and then we lead the family in singing whatever that hymn is, at least the first verse. So be thinking of that, why don't you." And then I said, "aw, I'm just kidding. We have a prayer and then we dig in."

But indeed, it's tradition in some families to go around the table and say what we're thankful for. Other families maybe find that to be a little cheesy, and certainly I have found that to be the cheesiness factor to have trickled out into larger society. Most years we watch the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade in the morning, and the over-the-top cheesiness as Savannah Guthrie asks Al Roker, "Al, what are you thankful for this year?" "Oh, I'm thankful for my family, and blah blah blah blah blah," and whatever else. I mean, it's just dripping with sentimentality and cheesiness and...blah!

One of my colleagues has a blog called Tamed Cynic, and I wish I'd thought of that title, because that's so me. Tamed Cynic.

But I wonder: Has Thanksgiving become maybe a little *too* sentimental? We get focused on the sentimental aspects, and while we might express our thankfulness, it's a generalized, "I'm thankful." Yeah, but...thankful to *who*?

For so many of us in the modern world, it is so easy to forget how independent we can become from God. We go buy whatever we want or whatever we need. Even if we're rubbing two pennies together to try to squeeze more money out, most of us still have a vehicle at our disposal to go to the store and choose from a wide variety of food. Yes, even here in our little Food Lion and Kroger that I hear so many complaints about compared to Teeter and all those bigger grocery stores.

So if we say we're thankful – thankful to who? Think about the origins of Thanksgiving. Those original Puritan pilgrims coming over on the Mayflower and landing on Plymouth Rock, or if you want to argue about the "real" first Thanksgiving here in Virginia up the road at Berkeley Plantation, fine, whatever, if that floats your boat. But to think about what an incredibly difficult journey that they had getting over here, where

they literally didn't know if they were going to make it, followed by an even more difficult year, at least in the Plymouth Colony. They endured a harsh winter, during which disease swept through the colony, killing nearly half of the original group; 78% of the women died during that first year alone. Imagine being there, having to do hard manual labor simply for survival. No modern medicine when disease struck, and certainly no phones, no email, no communication with folks back home. No easy way to run back home when the going got really tough. And to think we get all bent out of shape when our cell phones take longer than a few seconds to load a website.

So when the harvest was brought in, it was indeed a cause for celebration and thankfulness, that God and God alone had seen them through yet another year, even if they didn't know for sure if they'd make it through the next. There was no sentimentality. They were truly grateful to God, who had seen them through.

It's similar circumstances to which we read about in today's reading from Habakkuk, a book of the Bible from which we don't read all that often. And if you read through it, it's actually a rather bleak book of the Bible. Israel's reform-minded King Josiah had been killed. The nation had slid back into sin and apostasy, and the prophet Habakkuk struggled with God's silence and seeming unwillingness to move in their lives again.

In the third chapter, the prophet prays for God to revive his work in Israel. Toward the end of that prayer, from which we read today, Habakkuk realizes the hardships that could come with God's judgment. Be careful when you pray for God to heal our land here in America; it might just get worse before it gets better. Despite those difficulties, though, he says, "Yet." "Yet, I will rejoice in the Lord. I will take joy in the God of my salvation." And note he's not even taking joy and thankfulness in salvation itself. He's taking joy and thankfulness in the person who gives that salvation – in God. There is no simple sentimentality here.

The truth of the matter is that I often feel that there is little room for sentimentality in my own life. And I feel stupid for saying so. I am white, middle-class, white collar male, the very definition of privilege, according to today's standards. And yet I see things that people think they're able to keep hidden. I hear things that people aren't willing to tell anyone else. I've seen some of the worst of human behavior towards each other, especially when we kick each other when we're already down. I am acutely aware that our struggle is not against flesh and blood, as Paul says, but against the evil powers of the spiritual realm.

You couple all that and more with my own internal struggles. Stretches where God seems silent in my life. Generalized anxiety that, more often than I'd like, gets the best of me by shoving my head in the proverbial sand and hoping everything just passes

me by. And ADD, the severity of which makes time management a farce. I've wrestled with how much, if ever, to share with you about these internal struggles. Similar to how I'm hesitant to tell congregations that I have diabetes, for fear that then at potlucks you're going to say, "Should you be eating that?"

I'm not asking for a pity party. I'm not trying to make excuses. I work hard to overcome these challenges in my life. I'm on medication – don't always remember to take it (ADD). I've been to therapy. But you see, I'm supposed to be the leader. I'm supposed to be the provider of care, the one that's got it all together. I've struggled with what to share and how much to share, but someone that I trust suggested that I do so, because I'm told that I come across to some as cold, aloof, and standoffish. That I don't care. The truth of the matter is that, yes, I have a horrible case of RBF. If you don't know what it is, Google it or ask your friend. And the thing of it is, mostly, is that I fear that if you knew most of the time what's really going on in my head, you would think much less of me as a pastor at all.

Yet what keeps me going is that this is a calling. God won't let me do anything else, and I have wished. I see fruit that He bears through me and in spite of me, especially in spite of me. This calling is a privilege and an honor, to be invited into some of the most private moments of your lives. To offer care in the name of Jesus Christ.

And so... *yet*. Yet, I take joy in the God of my salvation, and I'm thankful to Him.

I struggle also to share this stuff because it seems like such small potatoes compared to what many of you struggle with. We had in our prayer walk this past weekend a box; Debbie called it God's Box. It says, "Deposit worries and things that are heavy on your heart and leave them with God." Great idea. And Debbie said that, surprisingly, she had to replenish the paper for that, because all that participated took full advantage of that, and I'm glad. When I did my prayer walk toward the end on Friday, I did the opposite. I dug in and I read through them. They're all anonymous; I don't know who wrote what. It's all right; don't panic. But it was an honor and a privilege to read through and to pray over those things with which you struggle. A lot of financial struggle. Relationships, health, loss. And I want you to know that I do care, even though sometimes I have trouble showing that.

You see in the bulletin for the past several weeks I've started putting in some office hours, times during the week when you might be more likely to find me in the office. And I put it that way because, hey, sometimes things come up and I have to step out. And this person who encouraged me to share these things also said that some feedback they had received was that some took offense to where I put, "and by appointment." And all that means is that we're all busy people, and if I know you're

coming by, or if I know you'd like me to come by, we'll make it happen. It might take a bit to coordinate schedules, but we'll make it happen.

What I've gotten to know about this congregation is your deep, abiding faith, even in the midst of personal struggles and otherwise. I give thanks to God for you, for the ways in which you have endured a pastoral transition, the grace you've extended to me and my family, the blessing that this church is to the community, and the joy that you take in each other and in the God of our salvation.

There comes a time in every relationship, especially in a marriage, where the honeymoon wanes. When you're kind of done trying to impress each other and you really get to know each other, warts and all. I think we're there. It's time to move on beyond mere sentimentality, especially this Thanksgiving. To get vulnerable. To get real, knowing that we're still loved, if not by each other, then by God, who loves us no matter what. And to move beyond just being thankful. That's a fantastic place to start. Gratitude rewires our brains and helps us be more positive people, anyway.

I shared with you in the beginning that one of my pet peeves has been always being the one that "has" to pray. But what I've learned is what a joy it is to be the one that *gets* to pray. To lead my family and extended family in giving thanks, not just in general sentimentality, but in giving thanks to God, that He's seen us through another year, even though we don't know who's going to make it through the next. So maybe you might do the same. Maybe you might open up. Maybe you might be the one to pray this Thanksgiving.

Thanks be to God. Amen.