

# *Thankful For Our Family of Grace*

**WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY**

November 19 & 20, 2016

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*Psalm 100 (NRSV)*

<sup>1</sup>Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.

<sup>2</sup>Worship the LORD with gladness;  
come into his presence with singing.

<sup>3</sup>Know that the LORD is God.

It is he that made us, and we are his;  
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

<sup>4</sup>Enter his gates with thanksgiving,  
and his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him, bless his name.

<sup>5</sup>For the LORD is good;

his steadfast love endures forever,  
and his faithfulness to all generations.

*Romans 1:8–12 (CEB)*

<sup>8</sup>First of all, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because the news about your faithfulness is being spread throughout the whole world. <sup>9</sup>I serve God in my spirit by preaching the good news about God's Son, and God is my witness that I continually mention you <sup>10</sup>in all my prayers. I'm always asking that somehow, by God's will, I might succeed in visiting you at last. <sup>11</sup>I really want to see you to pass along some spiritual gift to you so that you can be strengthened. <sup>12</sup>What I mean is that we can mutually encourage each other while I am with you. We can be encouraged by the faithfulness we find in each other, both your faithfulness and mine.

*Colossians 3:12–16 (CEB)*

<sup>12</sup>Therefore, as God's choice, holy and loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. <sup>13</sup>Be tolerant with each other and, if someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other. As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other. <sup>14</sup>And over all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. <sup>15</sup>The peace of Christ must control your hearts—a peace into which you were called in one body. And be thankful people. <sup>16</sup>The word of Christ must live in you richly. Teach and warn each other with all wisdom by singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

*Regardless of the circumstances of our lives this Thanksgiving, we ought to all find it easy to be grateful for the people of grace that make up St. Andrew.*

So we approach another Thanksgiving . . . a day set aside to take stock of our many blessings and to thank God and many others for all that they have done for us. This year, like most, I find myself swamped with blessings. My cup runneth over, indeed.

I know how blessed I am to have Patti, my sons, and my family. I love my work and am showered with appreciation from so many people at St. Andrew. I've got a great boss. I enjoy and respect my co-workers. Patti and I have a beautiful home and money in the bank. We're healthy. . . . See, it is easy for me to come up with a long list.

Of course, this hasn't always been the case in my life. I've been through divorce, job loss, and assorted other problems. Some years, Thanksgiving had a pretty hollow ring to it. And I know that every year there are people in our congregation for whom gratitude will not come easily. For them, there has simply been too much loss and pain.

But whether gratitude comes easily to us this Thanksgiving or with difficulty, we can all take the time to be grateful for the people who make up the fellowship of grace we call St. Andrew.

Of course, people of grace is what we ought to find at St. Andrew and every other community that calls itself Christian. We are recipients of God's grace and we are called to be givers of grace. Indeed, we are not simply urged or even commanded to be people of grace. Such grace-giving is simply part of who we are as Christians, new selves reborn into the body of Christ (see the page four textbox).

Paul is thankful for the people to whom he has been sent. Though he knows some of the Christians who have now returned to Rome (see the page four textbox), he doesn't know most of the community. But he is thankful for them. He knows that when he finally comes to Rome, he will be encouraged by their faith, as I'm sure he was despite the circumstances of his arrival.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, he writes that their faithfulness is being spread throughout the world. Hyperbole? N. T. Wright:

Hyperbole it may be, but it is still no mean thing to say that the faith of the Roman church was proclaimed "in all the world." Presumably this means that travelers known to Paul, not least Jewish Christians who had had to leave Rome under Claudius, were reporting the arrival in the capital of this strange new sect, neither ethnically Jewish (all the Christians in Rome for five years being Gentiles) nor pagan. There is unlikely to be a particular reason why he stresses their "faith" here, rather than, say, obedience (as in 16:19) or love (as in Col 1:8). What matters is that they are an authentic Christian congregation, for whom Paul thanks God through Jesus the Messiah (another formula that is hardly a formality). Paul often speaks of his "unceasing" prayers, referring probably to his keeping of regular times of prayer each day, though not excluding the sense of being "in prayer" at all times, standing in the presence of God with the churches on his heart and mind.<sup>2</sup>

### "Old Hundredth"

Psalm 100 is one of the most familiar of the psalms, perhaps second only to the 23<sup>rd</sup>. The psalm is brief and its message is simple: *God is good and we are his*.

A version of Psalm 100 was set to music nearly 450 years ago by William Kethe, a friend of John Knox, the great reformer. The tune was composed by Louis Bourgeois, who composed for John Calvin. The tune became known as *Old Hundredth* after Psalm 100, even though Bourgeois first composed it as a tune for a paraphrase of Psalm 134. Like St. Andrew, many congregations now sing *Old Hundredth* as the doxology (lit., "the word of glory and praise") each week during worship services. The original Kethe/Bourgeois hymn is #75 in the UMC Hymnal, "All People That on Earth Do Dwell." The Old Hundredth doxology is #95 in our hymnal.<sup>1</sup>

It goes against our grain to proclaim that we belong to God, that God has purchased us at an incalculable price, as the apostle Paul put it. Yet, "we are his" – all we are, all we have. My life is not my own. I am not free so that I can do anything with my life that I choose. I am free so that I may live my life as God created me to live it – loving him and loving neighbor.

There is no part of us that is not God's. Were God not good, then belonging lock-stock-and-barrel to God wouldn't be joyful. But *God is good*. God defines good. Thus, we can be thankful that not only are we God's, but that we know God. We know our Lord. We have much to be thankful for, much to remember as we gather for Thanksgiving, but, foremost, we are thankful that we are God's – his people and the sheep of his pasture.

1. from J. Clinton McCann Jr.'s commentary on the Psalms in *The New Interpreter's Bible*. This commentary set is available in the St. Andrew library.

<sup>1</sup>Paul doesn't get to Rome until the early 60's AD, and then it is as a prisoner of Rome. Though under house arrest, Paul was surely able to spend much time with the Christians in Rome.

<sup>2</sup>Wright, N. T. (1994–2004). The Letter of the Romans. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 10, p. 422). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Likewise, Paul is thankful for the Christians in Colossae<sup>3</sup>: “In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints.” In today’s passage from Paul’s letter to the Colossians, he in turn urges them to be thankful, living out the new selves that they are in Christ.

Paul is thankful for the Christians in Thessalonica: “We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Thess. 1:2).

He is similarly thankful for the Christians in Corinth and in Philippi. Paul’s thankfulness for all these people shines through his letters despite their many problems and issues. Only Paul’s letter to the Galatians lacks any thanksgiving for the Christians there, but that’s a story for another day!

For years, Paul traveled around the Mediterranean, establishing colonies of a new human race. The colonists had been reborn in Christ and were filled with the very Spirit of the Lord God. In his kindness to and love of these people, Paul was not merely being encouraging and hopeful, but clear-eyed about the grace and the faith evidenced by these disciples of Jesus.

#### *People of faith and grace*

Grace is one of those words that we toss around a lot, often without thinking about what is really meant. I like the old-fashioned definition of grace: “unmerited favor.” If you deserve it, it isn’t grace. Well-deserved rewards maybe, but not grace. Grace means a gift that we have no right to expect . . . none . . . zero . . . zip.

One of my favorite movies is about grace. It came out about ten years ago and was titled *Lars and the Real Girl*, and starred Ryan Gosling. You probably haven’t seen it, but I’m not giving the movie away by telling you that Lars is a troubled and socially alienated young man who finally gets a girlfriend by ordering a life-like, life-sized doll. For Lars, this doll is very much real and he begins to build an elaborate delusion around it/her. As the community learns of Lars’ delusion, they might be expected to respond with ridicule. Poor Lars does seem completely nutty. But they don’t, believing that the way to help Lars is to go along with his delusion. Instead of ridicule, they respond with grace. Participating in Lars’ delusion is their gift to him; he is the recipient of their unmerited favor. And this grace takes them all to a very surprising place.

I remember that as Patti and I watched the movie, we both thought to ourselves, “Wow, what friends . . . shouldn’t we all have friends like that! Such caring, grace-giving people.” And we knew that we do have such friends. Here, in the St. Andrew family, there are countless people who would extend to us and to one another the same love and grace that Lars’ friends extended to him.

#### *A Thanksgiving resolution*

If you are deeply connected into the fellowship that is St. Andrew, I know that you have been richly blessed. If you are only marginally connected, I urge you to resolve to deepen your connection to this fellowship of believers. Join a connection group. Get involved in a Sunday School class. Find places to serve. Yes, it means you have to take the initiative, but if you do, I’m confident that next Thanksgiving, your prayers of gratitude will, like my own, include this family of grace.

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<sup>3</sup>Colossae was a city in southwestern Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). By Paul’s day it was a city in decline, helped along by a calamitous earthquake in 60 or 61 AD.

### “The gospel of his Son” (Romans 1:9, NRSV)

In AD49, all the Jews in Rome were told to leave by order of the Emperor Claudius. The biographer Suetonius tells us that this was due to troubles in the Jewish quarter caused by one called “Chrestus.” Even by that time, there were Jewish followers of Jesus in Rome and they too were swept up by the edict. Priscilla and Aquila (see Acts 18) were two of those forced to leave Rome. But Claudius died in AD54 and the edict died with him. So Jews and Christians began returning to Rome. Paul writes to a Christian community struggling to be unified as Jewish believers returned to Rome and found the Gentile believers in charge.

Now, in his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul tells them that he is serving God by “announcing the gospel of his Son.” What is this “gospel?” The answer may be a bit surprising to you. It is in this proclamation that the Roman believers can find unity.

Though the writings attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are called gospels, that is not what Paul has in mind. The “gospel of his Son” is not a summary of Jesus’ teachings nor even of his ministry. The gospel is not the good news of Jesus, it is the good news about Jesus.

The underlying Greek word for “gospel” is *evangelion*. It is variously translated in the Bible as gospel/good news/glad tidings. From it, we get our English word “evangelism,” which is grounded in proclaiming the truth about Jesus.

In the Roman world of the first century, *evangelion* was not a church word, but was used to connote a proclamation of unusual importance, such as a great military victory, the birth of a son to Caesar, of a new Caesar taking the throne. Here is an inscription from 9BC about Augustus Caesar that illustrates my point:

“Caesar [Augustus] through his appearance has exceeded the hope of all former good news [*evangelia*] surpassing not only the benefactors who came before him, but also leaving no hope that anyone in the future would surpass him, since for the world the birthday of the god was the beginning of his good news [*evangelia*].”

One could substitute “Jesus” for “Caesar” and it would sound familiar!

Paul brings to the Romans and all the world a proclamation, announcing that in Jesus, God has redeemed all humanity and creation from bondage to sin and death. And that though it may seem to the world that Caesar, ruler of the vast Roman Empire, is the lord of all, in truth, it is Jesus who is Lord. The announcement of the gospel of God’s Son necessarily sets up a confrontation between God and the powers of this world, a confrontation that God has already won by virtue of Jesus’ faithfulness all the way to death on Caesar’s cross.

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Do you find yourself truly excited about the many blessings you’ve been given by God? If not, what can we do to capture that sense of joy and excitement . . . an excitement and enthusiasm for God that is so consuming we couldn’t help but tell others about it? Our spirit of thanksgiving would just come bursting out of us! Perhaps, we need to look beyond what God has “done for us lately” to the larger gift of being God’s chosen and beloved. Such a gift is not meant to be hoarded; it is meant to be shared. We at St. Andrew have been richly blessed by God. This community is a blessing to all who belong. Our challenge is always to remember that the charge given us by God is to be a blessing to others – to be the salt of the earth and the light to the world. Bright lights shine always and in all directions! What are you doing to share your light with others?
2. Thanksgiving is the right time to simply reflect upon the ways in which you have been blessed by God and by St. Andrew. You might share some stories about the most meaningful and memorable experiences you’ve had at St. Andrew or with other members of the St. Andrew family. What difference has St. Andrew made in your own life? What hopes do you have for St. Andrew? What things about the journey ahead will be most important to you?

## *Weekly Prayer List*

During the week, jot down the names of people who need your prayers.  
Such prayers bind you to them in the presence of God.

## *Daily Bible Readings*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. *(Nov 20 is Christ the King Sunday on the church calendar; it is the last Sunday in the Christian years that begins with Advent. Here are some readings about Christ the King).*

<b>Monday, Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24</b> The Sovereign Lord will look after his sheep.	<b>Tuesday, Jeremiah 23:1-6</b> The Lord will gather together the remnant of his flock.
<b>Wednesday, John 18:33-37</b> "Are you the king of the Jews?" Pilate asks.	<b>Thursday, Colossians 1:15-23</b> The supremacy of the Son of God
<b>Friday, Matthew 25:31-46</b> What will the King ask us when he comes in all his glory?	<b>Saturday, Revelation 19:11-16</b> The arrival of the King of Kings

