



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“IN EVERYTHING...WITH THANKSGIVING

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 138; Philippians 4:4-7

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, November 18, 2018  
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

**People:** *Thanks be to God.*

---

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

The family was sitting around the dining room table in advance of their Thanksgiving feast. They were taking time to share with one another something for which they were thankful. One of the children said that they were thankful for “good grades,” another was thankful for “family vacation,” still, another was thankful for “macaroni and cheese.” The father said he was thankful for a “job” which received a chorus of smiles and nods and universal sighs of relief.

Then came the mother’s turn. After a moment of reflection, she said that she was thankful for “the cupboard being bare.” “What do you mean, ‘the cupboard being bare’, mom?” asked their inquisitive 13 year old, the oldest of the three children. He knew better than any of his siblings the hard times that had recently befallen the family. He could distinctly remember, many an evening, when they gathered around that same dining room table and had nothing at all resembling a feast, because the cupboard, as his mother affectionately called it, had, indeed, been bare.

The loss of the husband’s job nearly a year and a half earlier had put the family in a financial tailspin, nearly putting them out on the street. The mother and father had insulated the children from that painful reality for as long as they could. That is, until they nearly ran out of food, which was, for everyone, the tell-tale sign that theirs was a most dire situation. And yet that was something for which the mother was thankful? With adoring love she looked at the

children and explained... "It was only when we had nothing that we learned what we really needed." She continued, "I'm not thankful that we didn't have enough food to eat, and I'm certainly not thankful that we couldn't buy you Christmas presents last year; but, I am thankful that through that experience our family has grown closer together, that we have learned to rely on each other and on God in ways we would have never done before." "I'm thankful," she went on to say, "that when the cupboard was bare, God's grace was still overflowing."

Oh, of the great many Scriptural mandates that give us trouble as the children of God, one of the most troublesome is that we are called to rejoice in the Lord always. Always! Yet during this season which we call Thanksgiving, are there not moments when we do not feel like rejoicing, occasions when we simply do not feel that we can bring our petitions and our requests to God with a thankful heart?

We read about attacks in synagogues and shootings at schools and we hear of lives lost in fires. Would we dare give thanks for those tragedies? Of course not! We wish they never happened, but they did! And it begs the question: So how can we give God thanks in the midst of those tragedies?

Well, perhaps as good a place to start as any is to pay attention to the moments of grace contained therein; moments when people are shown to respond to tragedy with compassion; moments when acts of kindness manage to sustain entire communities; moments when restaurants serve food without cost, and taxi drivers offer free rides and people open their own homes to neighbors they never knew before.

There is a lovely prayer in our Book of Common Worship which testifies to the active presence of God in the world today. It reads:

"God of compassion, you watch our ways, and weave out of terrible happenings wonders of goodness and grace. Surround those who have been shaken by tragedy with a sense of your present love, and hold them in faith. Though they are lost in grief, may they find you and be comforted; through Jesus Christ who was dead, but lives and rules this world with you. Amen."

Friends, we worship and serve a God who's nature it is to take the difficult situations of life, situations that seem completely devoid of anything worthy of thanks, and to be at work in them in such a way that a healing, and a wholeness, and, in fact, a future can emerge!

A hundred and ten or so years ago, a small church was begun in Etowah, Tennessee. Like many churches, as it grew, it moved from one place to another, though it always stayed within that same small community and it was very much invested in that small community called Etowah! Over the years, the care and welfare of children and youth became important ministries of that

church family and so they found themselves traveling to the local Presbyterian camp and conference center– the John Knox Conference Center and supporting it financially as well.

When the local community day care closed its doors in the mid-1980's, the Etowah Presbyterian Church started another one which operated uninterrupted for the next twenty-four years and until the school system opened a new facility.

The church, in more recent memory, struggled greatly with membership, they were down to a few dozen people, but they decided to do something very unique...they partnered with us at the Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church in Knoxville– they did this for a couple years. It was a very unique arrangement. Since they couldn't afford a pastor, for example, when there was a critical pastoral need, we would go to them, and occasionally they would send a contingent of folks to one of our special services. Most of the time, however, we simply worshipped together, though not in the way one might expect. You see, every Sunday the Etowah Presbyterian Church worshipped with us via the internet. They would have their own announcements and then they would turn their system on and worship with us via "live stream." We did that for two years, and it was a beautiful and unusual kind of arrangement.

That said, their church family eventually had to face the harsh reality that they needed to close the church – it was just too difficult for what had become a very small worshipping community. One Sunday afternoon I traveled to Etowah and preached the last sermon at that church, and while there were a number of obvious and legitimate reasons for why it was a very sad day, it was also a day when we gave God thanks!

We gave thanks for the ways that God had led their church family in the past...but we also gave thanks for how God was leading them just prior to and even beyond their closure. We praised God that, at that time when Etowah had no installed pastor, it came to pass that our two church families had become united in ministry, and as the weekly sermons were preached, as the prayers were offered, as anthems were sung, and as the Lord's Supper was shared...those sacred moments were shared together as members of the Body of Christ, a powerful and living testimony to the connectional nature of Christ's Church.

We also considered how it was that from the proceeds of the sale of the church property, the local library was going to be able to build a much needed elevator to help the senior adult community get in and out of the building. We celebrated how the John Knox Conference Center that had meant so much to them over the years was now the beneficiary of a gift of just over \$100,000.00.

We gave God thanks that their worship would now be more meaningful and their time, talent and treasure more effective within the two local churches that most of the members had decided to attend.

Isn't it interesting that those things for which they gave God thanks – they wouldn't have happened had they not sensed God's call to do a new thing. A difficult thing? Yes, absolutely! But even in those circumstances -- especially in these circumstances, they were able to give God thanks because they knew in their heart and in their mind that God was very active and at work in the life of people.

In our lives we will always face situations that don't seem to warrant much thanks. And it doesn't have to come in the form of life's tragedies or the closing of a century old church, it can be as simple as the 8,000,000 people that are in front of us in the checkout line or it could be a grandchild that is struggling to make good grades; perhaps it is a marriage that a loved one is frantically trying to make work. Are we supposed to give thanks in the midst of those things?

Well, why not? Why not give God thanks for the opportunities that we have in life to exercise patience? Why not give God thanks for the awesome responsibility we have of being stewards of our children's welfare - even during the difficult times. Why not give God thanks in the midst of our broken relationships...God is faithful.

Friends, the minute we stop believing that God is active and at work in our life and in the life of the world, the minute we fail to see in that empty cupboard the presence of God's grace, oh, the minute we cease to give God thanks and praise in all things, that is the moment when we deprive our souls of that most important element of gratitude which is intended to be ours as the children of God!

Think of it like this...the full expanse of our life, and our life lived together in faith - it should be nothing less than a living and breathing offering of thanks to the very God who loves us, and who will always be with us. The Bible puts it like this: "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col. 3:17).

Let us pray...

Lord, help us always - that in the darkness, we would see your light; that in times of despair, we would be granted hope; and that ultimately in death, we would experience life. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*\*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.*