

“Rejoice in God”

[Philippians 4:4-9](#)

I know that you were hoping to see Bishop Carcaño today! There is nothing like showing up and having people feel disappointed; this has been my story lately. Just the other day, I went to pick up my daughter from a playground, and as soon as she saw me, she had a look of disappointment!

Bishop Carcaño sends her regrets for not being able to be with you this morning; she is in Butte County visiting those affected by the fire.

As you may have heard on the news, the Camp Fire has essentially destroyed the entire city of Paradise. The fire is still not contained but it is already the worst fire in the history of California, with 76 known deaths and over 1,000 people missing. Some of you have met my wife, Jennifer, who is a United Methodist pastor serving at St. Paul’s United Methodist Church in San Jose. Her parents lived in Paradise, and after working for many years, they finally built their dream retirement home 15 years ago. It was a beautiful house that overlooked a gorge, surrounded by tall pine trees. There is a reason why Paradise is called Paradise; it truly is a beautiful place. And they were only a few years removed from their retirement when the fire destroyed their house.

My father-in-law, Bob, is a Director of a non-profit organization; it is a program with a living facility for adults with Autism. He has over 60 clients and 250 people on staff. Most of these people were living in Paradise on November 8th, when the fire started early in the morning, and it spread so quickly that I heard it was as fast as 80 football fields a minute; that is how fast the fire spread! With evacuations in order, Bob stayed behind to make sure that his clients and employees, over 300 people altogether, were able to leave Paradise safely. By the time Bob felt he could leave, it was late into the night, and the fire had spread far by then.

What made this fire so deadly was that Paradise sits on a hill with only three streets with which to leave the city of Paradise by, and one of them was completely blocked by the fire. Bob tried to drive through the fire, but the car became stuck. He abandoned his car and wandered around until he was able to find a stranger who could give him a ride. Both of Jennifer’s parents are safe, thank God! The last I heard is that every member of Paradise UMC was found safe; Bishop Carcaño is visiting them today. Let us continue to hold everyone affected by the fire in our prayers.

I am delighted to be here at Campbell UMC to worship with all of you today. I want to thank Pastor Ouk-Yean for the invitation to be here. I understand that you just finished a stewardship series, and now this is a Sunday to offer thanksgiving. As I thought of this topic, a story of my daughter came to my mind:

She is eight years old now, but when she was three, one day, I was driving her, and I parked my car, and came around to get her out. And that’s when, instead of thanking me, she screamed at me, “No Daddy, no. I can do this all by myself!” So I waited...and waited and waited, but she couldn’t unbuckle herself, so I of course helped her. Then she couldn’t get off the car seat, so I helped her do that. And then she couldn’t get out of the car because the ground was too low, so I held her as she stepped on the ground. She then

looked at me and said, “See Daddy, I did it all by myself!” There was never a “thank you” that came out of her mouth!

In today’s Scripture reading from the letter to the Philippians, it says, “Rejoice in the Lord always.” (Philippians 4:4 NIV) We know that Apostle Paul writes these words from a prison cell where he is held under a capital charge. He says in chapter 1 of Philippians repeatedly, “I’m in chains!” Knowing Paul is confined in a prison, you would think that these words, “I’m in chains” and “rejoice in the Lord always” could never be found together, but to our surprise, these words appear together repeatedly in the letter to the Philippians.

When Paul says, “Rejoice in the Lord, always,” the word, “always” in Greek is (πάντοτε) “pantote,” which truly means at all times, ever. Paul says there should never be a time when you are not rejoicing in the Lord; in all circumstances, offer “thanksgiving.”

We know Paul could do this, but this is certainly not easy to do for many of us. Part of the reason why we struggle to rejoice *always* and offer thanksgiving, is because many of us take things for granted. We have expectations for what we think we deserve in our lives, and when those expectations are not met, we feel disappointed, or even betrayed.

I once heard a story that goes like this:

There was a young man named Bill from a wealthy family who was about to graduate from high school. It was the custom in that affluent neighborhood and community for the parents to give the graduate a car as a graduation gift. “Bill” and his father had spent months looking at cars, and the week before graduation, they found him the perfect car. On the eve of his graduation, his father called him into his private study and told him how proud he was to have such a fine son, and handed him a gift-wrapped Bible. Bill was so angry that he threw the Bible down and stormed out of the house; he and his father never saw each other again. It was the news of his father’s death that brought Bill home again. As he sat one night going through his father’s possessions that he was to inherit, he came across the Bible his father had given him. He brushed away the dust and opened it to find a cashier’s check, dated the day of his graduation - in the exact amount of the car they had chosen together.

Imagine how much fuller Bill’s life would have been had he learned to live with gratitude? How much fuller would our lives be if we, not only say we’re thankful, but truly feel thankful deep in our hearts for all that we have?

It is difficult to shift our minds, to be thankful. In the ancient world, leprosy was a terrible, terrible disease, and for those who had it, their bodies were disfigured and they were cut off from everyone else. There was one thing all lepers wanted- to be healed. There is a story in the Bible about 10 lepers who approached Jesus, pleading with him to be healed. When Jesus healed them, only one came back to thank him, the rest of them were all preoccupied with themselves.

I resonate with those who did not come back to thank Jesus. I have not always been grateful in my life. A few years ago, I decided to do something about it. I began writing down a prayer of gratitude every morn-

ing. Like everyone else, I have days when I wake up and I am not looking forward to what I have to face, especially since I became a District Superintendent; there are many conflicts and complaints. However, even on those days when I would rather stay in my bed, I made it a point of writing down a prayer of gratitude. Sometimes what I'm thankful for is as simple as a having cup of coffee, and then there are days when I see my children getting ready to go to school, and I write down how blessed I am to have them in my life.

Over time, writing down these prayers of gratitude everyday shifted my focus from what I *want*, what I *desire*, what I *covet* in my life, to what I have already been given; the blessings God has already poured into my life.

My inspiration for writing gratitude prayers came from the Book of Psalms. As you know, the Book of Psalms is a compilation of prayers. In Psalm 139, the psalmist offers thanksgiving for his own life; he says, "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful." He acknowledged the life itself as a gift from God. Life is a gift and it is not to be taken for granted.

Jennifer and I will be taking our children to Paradise to see Bob and Linda during Thanksgiving this week. The children have been begging us to take them there to see their grandparents. We could not be more thankful that Bob and Linda are alive! Life is a gift; every day is a gift!

I once heard this story that during the Korean War, in the middle of the winter, there was a mother who was running for safety with her baby son. All she had was a blanket, and after days of running, because of fatigue and the snow, she finally fell down and could not move anymore. As she felt her whole body starting to numb, she did everything she could to provide warmth for her baby. With her body wrapped around the baby, she froze to death. Soon after, American soldiers passed through the field where she laid with her baby, and one soldier noticed something moving inside the blanket. He picked it up, and realized that it was a baby. Realizing that it was most likely his mother's body next to the baby, the soldier took the baby back home to America. Fast forward 19 years when that baby grew up to become a young man, and he visited the country where he was born. When he arrived in Korea, the first place he visited was the field where his mother had died and he was saved. He stood on the ground, took off his jacket and laid it on the ground, and while his tears kept streaming down his face, he whispered, "thank you, thank you, now it's my turn to give you warmth."

Life is a gift. Each day is a gift, and these gifts are not to be taken for granted. Paul says rejoice in the Lord "always."

Meister Eckhart said, "If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough."

Amen.