

Sermon TUMC - October 11, 2020 - Thanksgiving

Prayer of illumination: Spirit open our ears and hearts to hear your words. Amen.

Scripture: Philippians 4:1-9

### **What is being revealed? Rejoice and be thankful**

Michele Rae Rizoli

The book of the Bible that we call Philippians started out as a letter that the apostle Paul wrote to a group of believers gathered at Philippi. I think he would probably have been surprised that we now consider it scripture!

*(Encouragement to read Philippians)*

Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter, he was suffering under the powers of empire. And despite his difficulties, he wrote about joy and thankfulness. He told his people to stand firm in the Lord!

When I read it, I recognized Paul's sentiments in his letter, his straight talk, his love for his people, and his desire to encourage them in their faith in hard times.

I thought — “I feel all of that too!” And I decided to copy him and write you a letter this morning.

To all the saints (and the not so saintly) at Toronto Mennonite Church gathered virtually on this Thanksgiving Day,

I, Michele, pastor to this community along with my co-worker Peter, greet you in the name of **God**, Source of all life; **Spirit**, sustainer of the church, breath of prayer and giver of gifts; and **Jesus Christ**, our redeemer, peaceful defeater of the powers of death and evil.

Mercy and Peace to you in these revealing times.

I thank God every time I think of you — OK, *almost* every time I think of you (I do have some bad days) :-)

I am grateful for every one of you who has partnered with this community through your loyalty to Jesus Christ,  
your curiosity about faith and your knowledge of God's love for you,

I am grateful for your ongoing presence in this virtual space and I understand that, for some of you, it is difficult.

I am grateful for your generosity of volunteer time, and money, and expertise in service of Christ's body gathered here.

For the large and small ways you constantly care for and serve each other when no one is watching.

I pray that God will bless you, bless us, as we continue to be church together.

Beloved, I come to you first with some **lament**.

I grieve that our church rhythms have been disrupted.

I long for our physical connections, even as we stay apart because we care for each other.

I so yearn to hear your voices singing praises again alongside mine.

Loneliness is close at hand.

I miss checking in with you along the way, hearing about your week, learning your wisdom and sensing how it goes with your spirit.

In the world outside of our community, and within our community, anxiety and uncertainty are ramping up again. Mental illnesses are flaring, relationships are strained.

Our world is humbled and confused by this overwhelming dis-ease event. The political powers are scrambling for control and turning to abuse. We sense a shadow in the spiritual realm.

With this feeling of lament we pray together with Isaiah: God, in your mercy, subdue the noise ... still the song of the ruthless. (Isaiah 25:12)

Gathered church at TUMC, we too must **stand firm in the Lord!**

But what does that mean? Though I squirm a bit at the use of the term Lord, in this letter I very intentionally use "Lord" as Paul did. He said this when referring to Jesus, mostly because he wanted to remind his people that their allegiance

was not to the emperor Caesar, the ruler of the day, but to Jesus and his eternal ways.

In the same way today, as a church we claim loyalty to Jesus' path of peace, to Jesus' love of enemies, to Jesus' compassion for the poor as a counterpoint to the caesars of our day — be they politicians, fear mongers on social media, or all the systems of oppression that surround us. Together as a church we must stand firm, with God's help, against the pressure to think that those voices have the last word. The powers of the world don't get to shape us, we are shaped by Christ.

Paul constantly urged the folks at Philippi to rejoice and so now I will remind us of that too. Rejoice! But how can we rejoice and be thankful?

I believe that most of us here will likely have some version of thankfulness this weekend like what I do with my family. We go around the circle and we list things for which we are thankful: it usually enters around positive relationships, the beauty of nature, or other things that we are grateful for. For example, a friend this weekend remembered a near-miss accident years ago, and was grateful for protection.

Another version of it is to think of other people who have nothing and be grateful for what we "have." This is OK.

When times are tough, as they were for Paul and the church at Philippi, as they for us now, our thanksgiving can't take on the form of trivial positivity, it must also come from a deeper place.

For one thing, we might ask ourselves about how we relate to those who have nothing. Or why we have things and they do not. That circumstance is certainly becoming more and more the case.

For another, I would urge us to look for sources of joy that are not tied to circumstance or possessions, but rather to our core beliefs and foundational trust in God.

Many of us who grew up in the church might have experienced a type of encouragement to "always be joyful" which denied that anything was ever wrong and where it was shameful to be struggling with anything if you were a Christian. This is not what I'm writing to you about. Denial is not a strategy towards joy.

When I was a teenager, I remember a movement, that encouraged people to “praise the Lord anyhow,” based on a book by the same name. Even if something terrible happened, or you were ridden with tragedy and disease, you were not to complain, no, no, no, that wouldn’t do, you were to “praise the lord anyhow.” P.T.L.A. for short.

The promise that came with this magical phrase, was that God would be so pleased that you weren’t complaining, that your circumstances would change and you’d be showered with health and prosperity (one can still find Precious Moments figurines “churchandise” with that slogan on it).

Siblings in Christ, beware of false teaching about thankfulness being rewarded with prosperity and property! This is not from God.

Although thankfulness is never wasted we must resist the impulse to centre our gratefulness and our rejoicing on “things” or on our own personal comfort because — as we are learning all too clearly — circumstances can change. Then what?

So we must try to focus on a different reality beyond the immediate present, trusting that God’s love for us and God’s redemption (God’s acts that save us from evil) are ongoing.

And the best part is that we are not alone as individuals in this trust. God is “working out our salvation” as we gather as a church (Phil 2:12). Together we strive to have the mind of Christ, as brother Paul would say it.

Jesus resisted human power by being a servant, and by seeking out the sick and the overlooked. Jesus resisted the imperial powers by going to the cross.

So what does it mean to have the mind of Christ? It means emptying ourselves, serving, speaking with gentleness, embracing humility, carrying each other’s anxieties, praying for each other, and sharing our resources.

So we rejoice because we have each other, we face our difficulties as a community, a partnership, brought together under *this* kind of Lord, guided by the Spirit, loved by God.

**This solidarity is at the core of what we remember when we share in communion together, our partnership with each other in striving, with God’s help, to have the mind of Christ. And for that we can be truly thankful.**

Beloved community, there are many distractions in our world today. Many very valid causes for anxiety and concern. Stand firm in the Lord! Rejoice.

Turn your thoughts to the bigger picture of God's love and power in the world, to the deeper things; things that are honourable, true, just, pure, pleasant, commendable.

Keep doing the things that you have learned and received and heard in this community of faith, be thankful. And the God of peace will be with you.

Greet everyone who is in your household with Christ's peace.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Sincerely,