

## **“Joy and Thanksgiving”**

Psalm 95:1-7; Philippians 1:3-6 – Tesa Hauser

Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – November 19, 2023

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might remember your love and goodness God. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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I am so grateful that our Thanksgiving Special Offering is to support our Disciples colleges & universities and seminaries. Even though the seminary I attended, Claremont School of Theology, is affiliated with our Methodist siblings, the Disciple's presence is heavy and is where the Disciples Seminary Foundation (DSF) was closest to before the move to Fullerton. And DSF, along with peers at Claremont, is the biggest why I came to Vista La Mesa in the first place.

I know, I know, you're thinking, "Tesa, we've heard this story a million times." True, but it is now a part of the new story that I share about my ministerial formation, and you would be surprised how often I am asked about it. Outside of congregational ministry the opportunities I have received, the projects I have been honored to be a part of, and the relationships I have gained through my time at Claremont and Vista La Mesa have been invaluable.

When I think about Claremont and Vista La Mesa, I echo the words of Paul in Philippians chapter one, verses three through five, "I thank my God for every remembrance of you, always in every one of my prayers for all of you, praying with joy for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now." My

journey at Claremont, and our journey together since I began attending Vista La Mesa has included growth, being pushed out of our comfort zones, and some hardships, but it has also included so much joy and thanksgiving. Especially this year, as we celebrated Vista La Mesa's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary on the corner of University and Massachusetts! Thanks be to God!

As one commentary I read, Paul's greeting in Philippians is about, "Partnership, or *koinonia*, [and] is more than fellowship. It is more like an investment together in an enterprise. The Philippians have invested in Paul's ministry—even during a time of uncertainty." This type of communal relationship is an investment, of time, resources, and energy. For Paul, it was a time while he was jail, and though it only impacts him in the greatest ways, it was expected that family and friends would provide meals and support while the person was in jail. It speaks to the early formation and relationships within the Church, which we see first formally introduced in Acts chapter 2, but I think was true throughout the entirety of Jesus' ministry in less explicit ways. Still, thanksgiving is not just words or thoughts, but like we would describe love, it's an action word.

It is very much how I feel appropriately describes what I see about the people at Vista La Mesa and about my time within my various roles. Personally, it is one that I have been grateful for time and time again. I know that financially this congregation has invested in me, and that is not something I take lightly. We also

invest in others within our community with our money, which is huge given a church of our size. It speaks to the stewardship and care we have maintained of our finances, but also that we know money is what allows people to get an education or continue to advance in their careers. We invest our money in people and causes that will further advance the gospel, and we don't have strings attached. That no strings attached policy, that is where our thanksgiving offering is culminated. What we have been given is from God, and we are called to give it to others freely and with love.

Our pastor has taken time and effort to invest in me over the course of these last four years. As a solo pastor with all the demands and responsibilities that come with the role, mentoring, and investing in someone, is time consuming. It is spiritually, mentally, and emotionally tiresome. I hope you recognize that; and she has never made it seem like or make me feel like it was burden to her. Pastor Rebecca's efforts have been creative and with room for me to grow into who God has called me to be. She hasn't tried to form me into her likeness as a pastor, but into Christ's likeness. Thank you, Pastor Rebecca, and thanks be to God!

Still, I want to remind us of why we practice gratitude and how to keep being thankful even when we may not, "feel like it." Psalm 95 is a reminder of who God is and how we are in relationship to God. It says God is Creator, Maker, the Rock of our salvation, a great God, King above all gods, our Shepherd, and the

One who holds all things within their hands. This passage is very much within it's time, a polytheistic society, where many gods were worshipped, and leaders claimed god-like status. Though today's versions of this may look different, I think we can find those parallels of things and people, that are held up to this god-tiered status, that get in the way of recognizing God and God's voice.

The Psalmist notes that God is King of the gods, and that all of creation is within God's hands since it was God who created it all. Not only that, but God is our shepherd, and we are God's sheep. We are taken care of and lead by God, and we are to listen and respond to God's voice and direction. It is for these reasons that we sing and make a joyful noise to God. It is a response to the goodness we have been given. It is a response to God's steadfast love and enduring faithfulness.

I love this quote from Nadia Bolz-Weber, who I think beautifully describes the true essence of thanksgiving as laid out in the Psalm. She says, "In the past I've written page upon page about what praise is and is not. How praise isn't stroking God's ego sycophantically telling God how awesome God is – as though God has low self-esteem and created us for just this. How thankfulness is not an obligation like the thank-you note to Grandma – but is an act of freedom that doubles the joy of what was received." God doesn't beg for our praise and thanksgiving; it is a natural response to a life lived in relationship to God, that understands who God is and what God has done. It is a response to the incarnation, to the life, ministry,

death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a response to the gift of the Advocate, the Helper, the Holy Spirit.

On the other side, we don't have to beg for God's love, and forgiveness, and mercy, and grace, it is freely given. Thanks be to God! In a world that expects us to prove our worth and gain praise and recognition, God has said you are enough. I am your Shepherd, and you are my sheep, and I will hold you in my hands.

Another quote, this one by Rachel Held Evans says, "The great struggle of the Christian life is to take God's name for us, to believe we are beloved and to believe that is enough." God, who is this wondrous creator, maker, who sees and has called us, has invested in us without hesitation or reservation.

Thanksgiving is a response to the gift of life. It is not always easy when we are hurt or resentful, and it is not to ignore true suffering or pain in this world, but as I mentioned, thanksgiving is also an action word. Thanksgiving is gospel living, to follow the command to love God with our hearts, mind, soul, and strength and to love one's neighbor as oneself. Investing our time, our money, and our energy to the mission of the gospel. Working towards justice and peace, and so everybody knows they have been created good, beloved, by God. Thanksgiving is the Table, it is sharing of the body and blood of Christ, is it extending the table for *all* people, since Christ came for *all*.

Let us continue to be a church full of joy and thanksgiving, willing to invest in one another. The visits, the calls, and the time we take to make one another feel special during celebrations or how we surround one another in moments of grief and hardship. Let us invest financially in people and organizations, and causes the continue to push the gospel, but no strings attached. Let us be a church of Micah 6:8 and act justly, to love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.

Even though my role is shifting from staff to member, I am excited to keep investing in this community and to be invested in like I have been for so many years, "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you [in us] will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." Let us be thankful to God who has provided faithfully. Thanks be to God! I want to leave us this morning with words from Francis of Assisi,

"Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,  
where there is hatred let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope;  
where there is darkness, light;  
where there is sadness, joy.  
Lord, may I not so much seek  
to be consoled as to console;  
to be understood as to understand;  
to be loved as to love.  
Because it is in giving that we receive,  
in pardoning that we are pardoned."

Alleluia and Amen.