

**January 15, 2023**  
**What I'm Thankful For. What I'm Excited About.**  
**Matthew 16:13-18**

This Winter we'll be thinking about what we're thankful for and excited about. Why?

Being thankful is a good discipline. Being thankful reportedly has emotional and physical health benefits. It certainly benefits your relationships with other people. Motivation speaker Zig Ziglar comments, *"Be grateful for what you have and stop complaining – it bores everybody else, does you no good, and doesn't solve any problems."* Being thankful is good for us spiritually. When we count our blessings, we become mindful of how God is at work in our lives, families, community, and world in ways we never noticed before.

Thinking about what we're excited about is good, too. Given the past 3 years, we can find ourselves looking to the past, wishing things were as before. Or, if we do look ahead, we do so with apprehension and fear. Yes, there are a lot of unknowns in 2023. That doesn't have to be scary. Think back to the stories of Christmas we just read. They're all about unknowns. Mary, hearing she will be an unwed mother – *"Don't be afraid."* Joseph, hearing his fiancée is pregnant – *"Don't be afraid."* The shepherds, visited by angels – *"Don't be afraid."* The Magi, travelling across the desert – *"Don't be afraid."* The constant refrain is *"Don't be afraid."* There are unknowns everywhere, but facing the future with faith in God, we can face anything and everything. Maybe the future might even be great???

As we move into 2023, here's two things I'm very thankful for and very excited about.

**I am thankful for Jesus. And I'm excited about Jesus.**

As I shared last week, as a teen I struggled to find meaning in life. Without realizing it, I drifted into a philosophical position known as nihilism, a rejection of all religious and moral principles. The logical conclusion of this journey is the conclusion that life is meaningless. That skepticism led me into dark places, with no hope, no direction, and no purpose in life.

When I found God through my experiences in nature and (later) through reading the Bible, when (later) I met Jesus through the church), I discovered the Holy Spirit was at work in my life. I was coming to faith in God, Jesus, and the Spirit whether I realized – or wanted – it.

As I read and reflected, faith in Jesus made rational sense. As I explored Jesus' teachings, He helped me make sense of life, the universe, and everything else. As C.S. Lewis, another atheist-turned-reluctant-convert to Jesus, puts it: *"I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."*

Like Lewis – and many other people I've discovered – I can put forward a logical case for WHY I believe in Jesus. For me, as a person with a keen, inquisitive mind, exploring some of those intellectual discussions is important. I need to know there is rationality to Christian faith. I continue to enjoy some of the challenging conversations that come with this

intellectual territory, from the positive connections between Christian faith and natural sciences, to understandings of human identity. We can have those conversations if you wish.

While those academic discussions are great, realistically, the more subjective experience of KNOWING Jesus matters to me more. Through some of the best – and the darkest – times in my life, I have been very, very aware of Jesus being with me. Many of us have had the experience of knowing God's Presence during traumatic times. We KNOW Jesus is real as we have experienced His presence, comfort, strength, and healing in the hardest times.

A logical, rational case for Christ is great, but knowing all the right things about Jesus doesn't really give me passion and purpose in my life. What does give me passion is knowing Jesus IS real in my life. It's one of those realities that's hard to define, hard to put your finger on, and hard to describe, but if you KNOW Jesus personally as well, you know it's about much, much more than having the correct doctrines.

When you pray with Jesus, talk with Jesus, walk with Jesus, and spend time with Jesus, you KNOW in your heart of hearts and soul of souls that He is with you. On occasion (not all the time), you clearly sense His voice speaking to you in your heart and soul. You are aware of His presence. And, in my experience, when I've wanted to just walk away, I can't. Because I am very, very aware of His reality and presence in my life.

Some skeptics might argue I'm deceiving myself. But the combination of logic, my own experience, and the experiences of countless other people who share a similar relationship with Jesus, leads me to believe Jesus is very real. I'm thankful for how He's changed my life.

If Jesus rose from the dead and is alive and well – I'm excited. If Jesus is who He says He is – God Himself with us, always – I'm excited. If Jesus is building His church – then I'm really, really excited, because my future – our future is in His hands – the hands of the One who created the universe and everything in it, who rose from the dead, and is with us today and every day – I'm excited.

Most of all, as Jesus has been with me in the past and is with me in the present, I KNOW He will be with me in the future. Whatever the future brings. Jesus IS on the move in 2023, building His church. That's exciting.

### **I am thankful for church. And I'm excited about the church.**

To be honest, I know relatively few people who honestly, thoughtfully reject Jesus. A few who've said so, often have other reasons for rejecting Christianity. Specifically, a lot of people have issues with the church. I don't blame them. If you're looking to the church or church people to be the perfect reflection of Jesus, you will be disappointed.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), one of the anti-God philosophers I gravitated to in my pre-Christian era, was outspokenly critical of the church. He declared, *"In truth, there was only one Christian and he died on the cross."* He is absolutely correct, of course. Jesus was the only One who ever lived out biblical principles perfectly.

The church – across time, space, denomination, and tradition – is far from perfect. We can be honest about that. There is no defense for the violence, racism, sexism, abuse, or some of the unpleasant words and behaviours done by religious people. You can think of plenty of your own examples of people who talk about Jesus, but don't live out their faith authentically.

Hypocrisy, of course, happens when we present ourselves as having it all together when everyone can see we aren't. If we're humble enough to admit that we fall short of perfection, but we aim to keep trying to do better, I'm OK with that.

As for me, despite all that, I'm thankful for Jesus' church. I love it.

Why? We all know we live in very polarizing times. The church brings us back to something bigger and more basic than all our differences - Jesus. The church brings us to Jesus as the foundation, the essence, the centre of our lives. And the church sets us on a mission – exciting mission – to be God's good news to all people.

I'm excited because the church is all about Jesus. The church is about the love of God, revealed to us in Jesus. *"God loved the world so much, He gave His Son ..."* That is our message. God has loved us, while we were still sinners, completely and unconditionally. He forgives us. He gives us a new start. A new life. It's all about Jesus. And Jesus is super exciting. He changes everything.

At its best, the church is people who love Jesus. We may be of very different ages, ethnicities, abilities, experiences, backgrounds, politics, theologies, and countless other things. None of those matters. What matters is Jesus. Only Jesus. We are an amazing collection of people who would never meet if it were not for Jesus. We would never know one another if it were not for Jesus. Our lives would be so much poorer if it were not for Jesus.

As we are the church, we help one another, and our friends, neighbours, and family discover God's love and forgiveness. God's desire is that all people everywhere know Him, love Him, and live for Him. Our mission is, as God has loved us, we love one another and we love our world. When people meet Jesus – on their own or through the church -it's exciting.

There's lots of judgment in the world. Lots of anger. Lots of division. There's not a lot of genuine love. Certainly not much unconditional love. This is the kind of love Jesus modelled – while we were still sinners, He loved us and gave His life for us. As God has loved us – sacrificially, unconditionally – we love all people sacrificially and unconditionally. This is the love, grace, and hope our world desperately needs to hear and see from us, as well.

Why am I excited about the church? Because we are good news of great joy for all people in a world that desperately needs good news. Joy. And love among all people. We are God's people, bringing His love into the world. And, through His Spirit, we can change the world.

**Why does Jesus matter?** Because He is God's love revealed to us. Made real for us.

*"This is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him"*(John 3:16-17). No one needs more judgment and condemnation. We need love, hope, peace, and joy. This is who Jesus is. That's exciting.

I'm so thankful for Jesus, and I'm excited to see what Jesus will do among us in 2023.

**Why does church matter?** The church is – the people of God, doing their best to love as Jesus' loved in a hurting, broken world. As we do our best to live out the love of God, we model a new type of community. A community centered on Jesus. A community that models God's unconditional love. We don't just tell people good news, we ARE good news of great joy for all people. We have an awesome mission. That's exciting.

I'm so thankful for the church, and I'm excited to see what God can do in us in 2023.

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