

Grace...

It was 39 summers ago, when I first went to Camp Ontario on Rainy Lake, just over the border into Canada from MN. This year's annual Walter competition took place September 3-9. Walter is our name for the largest Northern pike caught in our group during the week. This year we were 8 fishermen. Bob, Dan, newbie Eric, and I are cousins, Jerry a cousin-in-law, and 3 others--Sam, Jim, and Rich--are friends of cousin Bob. Jim and Rich were newbies last year.\*\*\*

I'll get back to all that.

Before I left on vacation I decided that the theme of this annual fishing sermon would be GRATITUDE. Here is why: I was very ready for a vacation break and I wanted to enjoy my vacation. So, I decided to focus on simply being grateful--Pay attention to the blessings God would give during the time away: *"Count your blessings, name them one by one"* as an old hymn says.

I have a teacher who taught me about Gratitude. His name is Paul. We often call him the Apostle Paul: An Apostle because he met the risen Jesus when he was going the wrong way down a road to Damascus. Meeting Jesus turned him around from being an angry restless persecutor of the church into probably the Christian church's greatest missionary.

Did you catch those GRATEFUL words of Paul in his letter to the Philippians we heard today, ***"I have learned to be content with whatever I have."*** <sup>12</sup>*I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.* <sup>13</sup>*I can do all things through him who strengthens me."*

Why was Paul content with WHATEVER HE HAD? Why was Paul ALWAYS GRATEFUL? Because he had met the risen Jesus. Through Jesus God gave Him everything he would ever need, forever and ever.

Paul knew that his circumstances in this life would keep changing, but Paul believed the most important things for him would never change. That is: Paul believed his Heavenly Father loved him so much that Jesus was sent to save him--Save him from himself and all the forces working against God. Paul believed that God

promised him in Baptism that he was God's beloved child forever. Paul believed whatever was happening around him would not change God's undying commitment to him. So, it made sense, he was content.

What apparently thrilled Paul to no end was that God wanted to use him to tell this good news to others. Paul spent his life spreading the GOOD NEWS of what God has done in Jesus for people like us.

This letter to the church in Philippi is often called Paul's *epistle of joy* because he keeps coming back to the JOY he has in Christ. What makes that especially remarkable is that Paul was in prison as he wrote. Paul even is GRATEFUL to be in prison because in prison he has been able to tell people the good news of Jesus who normally would not be listening to him.

So, Paul is a professor of gratitude for us. Haven't we all experienced that when we are GRATEFUL, THANKFUL for what God provides us we live happier, more contented lives?

I wanted a happy vacation, watching and listening for God's gifts. Giving thanks seemed like the best way to do that. God is in control. Don't forget what Jesus has done for you and me. NOTHING in this life should choke out of us the life, the undying hope, the joy that our Lord bestows upon us through the death and resurrection of Jesus.\*\*\*

OK, here is the story of the annual Cousin's Fishing Trip; AKA this year's Walter Competition. As I said earlier: Walter is what we call the largest northern pike caught during the week. Cousin-in-law Jerry got the biggest fish on our first day of fishing--Saturday--allegedly 35 1/2 inches. But, I cleaned that fish and I have my doubts about the length. But, the very next day Jerry caught a fish in my boat which measured 36.5 inches. So Jerry wore the leaders shirt Sunday and going into Monday.

On Monday I had Rich from Denver in my boat. If you heard the fishing sermon a year ago, you may remember what I said about Rich. I don't think I have ever had anyone so GRATEFUL to be in my boat. Again this year each of the two days Rich was in my boat he thanked me before departing in the morning for the honor of fishing with me. And at the end of the day, he thanked me for the privilege of fishing in my boat that day.

That morning Rich was my witness as I caught a 37" fish, weighing 11.5 lbs. in Shoe Bay seizing the lead in the Walter Competition. I put that fish back in the lake. Soon after that we moved to the bay on the South side of Crow Island. We had been there about 10 minutes when I hooked another nice fish. After a lengthy fight and assistance from Rich on the motor, my right hand was just barely big enough to get a grip around the

neck of the fish at the gill flaps. I picked out of the water this beautiful girl (all the trophy fish are females). She was only 36.5 inches long, but 13.75 lbs. Bam! I had extended my lead.

So, on Tuesday I was wearing the Leader's Shirt and that day nothing bigger was caught. (Any year I get to wear the leader's jersey for at least one day, is a good year to me.) On Wednesday I started to wonder if 13.75 might hold up as big fish of the year. I won the Walter Trophy in 2014, and '15 each time with a fish weighing 14.5 lbs. I was hoping for a bigger fish in the Walter Competition this year.

On Wednesday in Cousin Dan's boat grateful Rich caught a big fish. Rich's fish was 38:5 inches long and weighed 16.5 lbs. Ever grateful Rich that night thanked me for things he learned watching and listening as I landed my two big fish on Monday. Rich's 16 1/2 lb. fish won the Walter trophy.

Before I left on vacation a number of you sent me off with this blessing, '*Catch Walter*'. Thank you. I tried. But, it is better that Rich got Walter this year rather than me. Why?

I caught Walter the two previous years. Winning this year's Walter award means a lot more to Rich than it would have to me. I am grateful Rich won. I probably would not be so grateful if Rich were a jerk, but he is a kind, polite, humble, gentle soul, who is remarkably GRATEFUL. I have taught Rich some things about fishing. He has taught me about GRATITUDE. I think I came out ahead on that deal.

And honestly, before even getting to Camp Ontario, I thought more than once, "*If I don't win Walter this year I hope Rich does.*" I am confident Rich's glow has not worn off in the last two weeks.

Besides I have a lot to be grateful about in that trip. I am grateful for the privilege of almost a full week in the amazingly beautiful wilderness God made named Rainy Lake. I am grateful that I caught the 2nd and 3rd largest fish of that week. I am grateful all 8 of us got there and back safe and sound. No boats on the rocks, no injuries. Thank God for all that.\*\*\*

But, since I am telling fishing stories and you are pretty much trapped as listeners: I have one more. This one is from the two days before I met the fishing group to cross over into Ontario.

I drove to the small town of Karlstad in N. MN on Wed., Aug. 31 to stay with my seminary friend Mitch who is a pastor there. On Thursday I put my electric trolling motor on his canoe and we fished in Lake Bronson State Park. We caught 16 northern pike that day. We kept five of them. Not huge fish, but pretty good--fun to catch and delicious to eat. That night we had an excellent blackened fish supper I cooked on his Coleman stove. And we froze 7 more meals of fish for Mitch that went into his freezer: Lots to be grateful for there.

The next day we drove over an hour to his home town of Baudette, MN. Just a few miles east of town we stopped at the Rapid River to fish there casting from the shore line. The water of the rapids was really gushing as we cast into the edges of the current with no luck.

So, I climbed down a rocky ledge onto about a 2 foot by 2 foot rock surface, just a few inches above the water level and started casting. No bites, but as I was casting I thought, *"If I get a good fish on here, how could I possibly land it on this little platform that my two large feet are mostly covering?"*

Well, a few minutes later I cast parallel to the shoreline into relatively still water and after just a few cranks I felt a twitch on my line and then it stopped. I thought I must be snagged on a branch or rock near the shore. But, then my line started to move. And I thought, *"That is a big fish."*

Big northern pike don't shake; they just go wherever they want to go when first hooked. I hang on and try to keep them working so eventually they will tire out. About 10 minutes after hooking this fish Mitch and I got our first look at her. About 5 minutes later I got my hand on her. No way was I going to be able to pick her up by the neck. So I tried reaching under her gill flap to grab her jaw bone in order to lift her out of the water. I tried that several times. She did not like that.

Finally I handed my fishing rod to Mitch and pulled her close with just my hand on the line. Then I got both hands under her and hoisted her on to the small rock I was standing on. She really did not like that. She flipped around and went back into the river--but still hooked. It took a while, but I got her up on the rock with me again. Again she thrashed around and went back in the river. The rock I was standing on was now very slippery. But, she was still hooked.

The third time I hoisted her on the slippery rock I was able to pin her down with both hands and one knee. When she finally calmed down I did get hold of her right jaw bone.

Shaking from an adrenaline rush I started climbing the steep rocky steps looking for higher ground to secure this powerful fish that was not exactly CAUGHT yet. I made it.

My friend Mitch was as excited as I was. He had never seen a fish caught that was that big: Let alone caught casting from a shoreline.

That big girl was 42" long, 19.25 lbs. The 2nd largest northern pike I have ever caught. By far the biggest ever caught from shore. And, bigger than any pike I have caught over the last 39 years of fishing at Camp Ontario.

Mitch took a few pictures. Then I climbed back down the rocky steps, put her in the water, pulled her by the tail backwards to get water flushing over her gills for a couple minutes. When I let go, she rolled over to get right side up and slowly swam away.\*\*\*

Now I am supposed to make some feeble efforts to connect my fishing stories to God's story: so how about this?. THIRD TIME out of the water I had this magnificent creature God made.

In Baptism we come up out of the water 3 times. Then our Lord has us. We are His then. His name is on us, his mark on us. We belong to Him. And...

That is when He sets us free to live--to really live. We are free to live secure in our Heavenly Father's promises and free in the confidence that our future is in His loving hands.

You are a trophy. God made you that way and sets you free to live and grow in under God's gracious care.

FINAL WORDS--Already...

**Gratitude:** For years I have realized that living with gratitude is a key to happiness. But, this year I read something that takes **Gratitude** to a higher level. John Milton, the author of *Paradise Lost* wrote:

***"Gratitude bestows reverence, allowing us to encounter everyday epiphanies, those transcendent moments of awe that change forever how we experience life and the world."***

I love that quote. It takes gratitude to the next level. I thought '*Gratitude bestows HAPPINESS.*' And I still do. But Milton goes so much deeper than happiness. Happiness is just the tip of the iceberg. REVERENCE goes deep.

Listen once more: ***"Gratitude bestows reverence, allowing us to encounter everyday epiphanies, those transcendent moments of awe that change forever how we experience life and the world."***

Children of God, go out there to fish for people using the love of God. And go out there GRATEFUL, REVERENT even. God has plans for using you. Amen.