

Dear Leominster Church Family Letter #13

“Grace be to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ.” In no better way could I introduce a letter than by offering you the timeless greeting Paul the great apostle gave to the believers at Rome in the early days of the church. We’re not sure what the first of the Pauline letters was, some say 1st Thessalonians, some say his letter to the church in Galatia. But the evidence is overwhelming that the last letter Paul wrote was to a young man named Timothy. In his second letter to his young understudy, we find these famous final words, ***“I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.”*** 2 Timothy 4:7-8 Many scholars say that 2nd Timothy was the 13th and final letter of Paul. As we find ourselves ready to get back together after these many weeks, it’s just a coincidence this will be my 13th and final letter as well.

I want to share with you how much I’ve enjoyed sending off these weekly missives. When I penned the first one, I had no intention of going on for so long. However, the unusual and extraordinary experience we’ve gone through compelled me to press on in order to keep as much connection as possible during these unprecedented times. When I began, there was no set format I intended to follow. I *did* know I wanted my correspondence to come across as real and from the heart, as well as to fix this truth in your mind, that the church in reality is not a building, but people.

I also didn’t intend to include and share in these letters all the little tidbits and anecdotes about our home, but it seems that’s just the way it turned out. While you didn’t burn any calories, I hope you’ve enjoyed these little walks down memory lane as much as I have. It seems only fitting to share one more with you as we draw to the close of these weekly messages.

We’ve all heard of those unfortunate people whose homes were in the direct path of some out of control wild fires or rising flood waters. When word came they had only a short time to evacuate, a few hours or in some instances minutes, they had to quickly determine what they would take with them as they escaped with their

lives. In most situations, people gathered up important legal papers along with invaluable family photos, and then whatever else would fit into their car or trailer. As I sit here in my living room wondering what I'd do if this happened to me, I'm sure I'd make many of those same choices. But if I had a chance to grab one last thing on the way out the door of *my* home, I'd take a painting. A portrait prominently hung in every place we've lived for the last 40 years. It's a work done by a Christian artist named Harry Anderson who depicts Jesus in a small boat standing with both hands on the wheel as wild waves crash over the side of the vessel. Winds howl and lightning flashes across a dark and ominous sky. Against this desperate backdrop, three others in the boat, a man, a woman and a young boy all have their eyes fixed on the One who's at the wheel. His face is calm and serene. He stands with a look of unflinching resolve, fearless as the Master of earth and sea and sky. The title of the painting, "*In Time of Storm,*" has always had a very special place in my heart, especially during those times when everything around me was coming unglued, when circumstances threatened the loss of all that life holds dear. But when I've look at that painting in the midst of life's turmoil, when the eye of faith has grasped the promise "*I will never leave you nor forsake you.*" Hebrews 13:5, when I look away from life's storm to the real anchor of my soul, my spirit has been stilled. I know that by "*Looking unto Jesus,*" Hebrews 12:2, the Captain of my salvation still stands, steadfast, undaunted and unchanging at the helm of my life.

Yes these have been soul stretching times for each of us. I'll confess to you in these last three months there've been some challenging moments, both personally and professionally. While my faith has been tested like never before, the promises of God, my faithful life companion and my brothers and sisters in Christ have all inspired me to press on. For all these people I'm left with a profound sense of gratitude. But there's one other person who's brought great inspiration and renewed courage to me in some of the darkest days of this ordeal. Let me close by telling you about Martin Rinckarts.

Martin was born in Leipzig Germany in 1586. He became a pastor at the age of 31, right at the beginning of one of the most destructive conflicts in human history, the Thirty Years War in which it was estimated that eight million lives were lost. But during these 30 years he stood by his flock helping them under the most unimaginable distress. He had to endure the quartering of soldiers in his house and

the frequent plundering's of his small stores of food. But as if this was not bad enough, a plague, far worse than Covid-19 swept over the country. In Rinckart's town, 8000 people died including the four remaining members of the clergy. Doing the work of his four departed colleagues, he cared for the sick and dying. He buried more than 4000 people but through it all never got sick. The pestilence was followed by a famine and Martin was constantly surrounded by the hopeless and the starving.

Adding to the hardship, the Swedes demanded of the defeated townspeople tribute money amounting to many thousands of dollars. Rinckart went into the enemy's camp to ask for mercy. When it was refused, he turned to his fellow citizens and said, "*Come, my children, we can find no hearing, no mercy with men, let us take refuge with God.*" He fell on his knees, and prayed with such touching earnestness that the Swedish general relented, and lowered his demand to 2,000 florins. Rinckart's own losses were so great that he had difficulty in finding bread and clothes for his children and was forced to live in poverty for many years. Yet amazingly, his spirit was not broken.

After nearly thirty years of ceaseless struggle, when it finally began to look like peace would return, Martin decided to teach his children a song of thanksgiving they could sing at the dinner table as a kind of grace. With all he had been through, Rinckart's amazingly titled his song, "*Nun danket alle Gott.*" The words reflected a spirit of unbounded trust and praise to God. His efforts would have been lost to the world if not for a British writer named Catherine Winkworth who translated Martins table grace song into English. Johann Cruger set it to music in 1647 and it has blessed the world for centuries now. I'd have to say Rinckart's lyrics most accurately sum up what's in my heart as we come to the end of these 13 weeks....."*Nun danket alle Gott.*" ... "*Now Thank We All Our God.*" Yes, my sentiments exactly.

Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things has done, in Whom this world rejoices;
Who from our mothers' arms has blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

Oh, may this bounteous God through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us;
And keep us in His grace, and guide us when perplexed;
And guard us through all ills in this world, till the next!

All praise and thanks to God the Father now be given,
The Son, and Him Who reigns with Them in highest Heaven—
The one eternal God, Whom earth and Heav'n adore;
For thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore.

With love and profound thanks to each of you for the privilege of sharing this journey together.

Pastor Mark and Pam