

Give Thanks
I Thessalonians 5: 14-22
November 22, 2009
First Federated Church
Peoria, Illinois
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Test: *“Rejoice always, pray unceasingly, give thanks in all circumstances.” (vs. 16-18)*

I have had the hymn “Give Thanks” in my head for the past two weeks. At first I tried to ignore it. Then, when I couldn’t shake it, I decided that it was the Holy Spirit prompting me in what direction my sermon should go.

Rejoice always, pray unceasingly, give thanks in all circumstances. That is a very tall order; especially the last part. It is hard to give thanks when things go bad. In the early 1980’s Dave Dravecky was a pitcher for the San Diego Padres and San Francisco Giants. At the height of his career he broke his arm while pitching in a game. X-Rays indicated a growth on his pitching arm. Surgery removed the deltoid muscle in his pitching arm. In an effort to kill the cancer cells, his humerus bone in the pitching arm was frozen.

Over the next nine months he wrote a book entitled “Comeback” and despite all of the odds, he returned to the major leagues and pitched eight innings in a game against the Cincinnati Reds. Five days later he pitched three hitless innings against the Montreal Expos. By the fifth inning, though, he began to feel a tingling sensation in his pitching arm. The next inning his control was a bit off. The first batter hit a home run. He hit the second batter. When the third batter came to the plate, on the very first pitch, his humerus broke and he fell to the ground in pain.

The cancer had returned. Ultimately he had to have his arm amputated at the shoulder. As he was recuperating he wrote a book, a follow up to his first book “Comeback,” titled “When You Can’t Come Back.” In that book he writes about a spirit of thanksgiving in the face of tragedy.

Tragedy pushes us through a one-way door, and once we pass through it, we can never return to the way life was before that tragedy. A parent who loses a daughter to leukemia can never again go back to her bedroom and kiss that little girl goodnight, or read her bedtime stories, or kneel beside her bed and pray. A Vietnam vet with his legs blown off can never go back to the sidewalks of his youth where he skipped so kiddishly and carefree. A woman who has been brutally raped can never go back to a time of innocence when, as a starry-eyed little girl, she dreamed of being swept off her feet by some handsome prince.

We can’t go back, no matter how much we ache to do so. All we can do is give thanks for what once was, for the good that was there, for the happy times that were had, for the laughter, for the love, for the memories that were shared. Then, saying goodbye to those times and to those loved ones, we can put our hand in the hand of Him who gave orbit to the sun and the moon and the stars, and trust that He as a course for our lives as well. (p. 159)

It's hard to have a spirit of thankfulness when things go bad but it is perhaps even harder to have a thankful spirit when things go well. Israel was constantly warned, when they entered the Promised Land, not to forget the One who brought them out of the chains of Egypt.

Make sure that when you enter the Land that you do not forget your God. ... Make sure that when you eat and are satisfied, build pleasant houses and settle in, see your herds and flocks flourish and more and more money come in, watch your standard of living going up and up--make sure you don't become so full of yourself and your things that you forget God. (Deuteronomy 8: 11-16, selected, The Message).

In her book, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" Maya Angelou reflects upon a girlhood experience. She recalled seeing sharecroppers gather at her grandparents grocery store before going out into the fields to pick cotton in the hot sun. She recalled how they would be laughing as they got ready for work but that when they returned at the end of the day, they would be hot, sweaty, dirty, tired, cut and beat. Yet, they always thanked God for getting them through another day. She contrasted that image with what she saw in cocktail parties in Manhattan penthouses where reverence for God was never heard. And she wrote:

People whose history and future were threatened each day by extinction considered that it was only by divine intervention that they were able to live at all. I find it interesting that the meanest life, the poorest existence is attributed to God's will, but as human beings become more affluent, as their standard and style begin to ascend the material scale, God descends the scale of responsibility at a commensurate speed.

I remember that ten lepers once approached Jesus. They called out to him "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." This was a standard appeal not for healing but for food, money or clothing since lepers survived on the benevolence of others. Jesus told them to go show themselves to the priest. Now there was only one reason for doing this. There was only one reason to show themselves to the priest and that was to get a certificate of healing. As they went on their way, the gospel writer tells us, they were "cleansed" of their leprosy. One of the ten--a foreigner, a Samaritan--returned to Jesus to give thanks. Jesus asked, "Were their not ten? Where are the other nine?"

Well, they were going to the priests. They were getting on with their lives.

That is the temptation that many of us face. We become so busy getting on with our lives that we lose the spirit of thankfulness.

This morning's text is interesting. *Rejoice always, pray unceasingly, give thanks in all circumstances.*" The writer did not say that we should give thanks for all situations. He said that we should practice thanksgiving in all situations. There is a big difference between the two.

The apostle Paul knew that life can be very hard, very difficult. He knew that bad things can and do happen. As he wrote in another place he knew what it meant to have plenty and to be in want, to be persecuted, ship-wrecked, beaten, maligned. But he was still able to say, "Be thankful in all circumstances."

What did he mean by that? I believe that Paul meant that we need to look for God in all of life's circumstances, the good as well as the bad, for God is there in the midst of life. God promised to be with us until the end of the age, in the valley of the shadow of death as well as on the mountaintop.

I think that that is why in 1621 a group of Pilgrims could celebrate a day of Thanksgiving. Over half of the number had perished through disease, hunger and exposure. Their losses were so severe that at one point they buried the dead at night, lest the Indians could see how small their number had become. But in the midst of all of this, they were able to lift up thankful hearts to the One from Whom all blessings flow.

I think that that is why in the darkest moment of the American Civil War that Abraham Lincoln issued a Thanksgiving proclamation. No one in their right mind could give thanks *for* the Civil War. But Lincoln knew that God was somewhere in the midst of the conflict and that one day God would build something new from the ashes. As the apostle Paul wrote in another of his letters,

We know that in all things God will work for the good. God can take the broken threads of our lives and weave them into something beautiful.

Always looking for God in the midst of life changes the way in which we look at and respond to the world. It not only makes us "thankful" but "grace-full." We become new men and women.

A pastor named Bill Simpson once told about something that happened on a Thanksgiving eve at a church he served. They would work with a community agency and adopt ten families for Thanksgiving. Members of the church would drop off the food supplies for ten Thanksgiving baskets, which would be picked up the day before Thanksgiving. There would be a turkey and ham, vegetables, pies and breads. Everyone was filled with joy; those who could give and those who received.

One year an eleventh family showed up. A mother, father and three kids piled out of a battered old rusty pick up truck. The pastor explained that the church had only prepared ten boxes--enough for ten families--but that he would do what he could. And then an amazing thing happened. One of the women who was leaving with a box of food in her arms turned around and went back to the table. She set her box down, pulled an empty box out from under the table, set hers beside it and began to put food in the eleventh box. Then others began to do the same thing. Before long the eleventh box had the most food in it. Then they turned around and gave it to the eleventh family. (Story from "In All Circumstances", a sermon by the Rev. Mark Standiford, First United Methodist Church, San Diego, CA)

The amazing thing about the story is not what went into the eleventh box but what came out of the hearts of the ten. Thankful hearts do God-like wonders.

Give thanks, with a grateful heart. Amen.